Rosie Johnston

INSIDE OUT

'She writes ... with humour, sanity and obvious truth'
JOHN MORTIMER

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Three hours passed before I was allowed to see my family, and then it was through a pane of glass. Their breath smudged against the window as they pressed their noses to it, their voices sounded muffled and distant. They did their best not to show their shock by jollying me along, urging me to play netball and make raffia baskets. It didn't work. We kept it short so that no one would betray their real fears. They jostled off, mouthing an agonised chorus of goodbyes, and I was left alone, my white face reflected in the glass.

About the Author

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Inside Out

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To Mum, Dad, Clara, Lily, and Silvy,
who have supported me throughout everything

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In order to protect the identities of the inmates and staff of the prisons described in this book, I have changed their names. I have not changed the names of my family and friends.

FOREWORD

On 5 December 1986, I was sentenced at Oxford Crown Court to nine months' imprisonment. I pleaded guilty to five drug-related charges: possession and supply of heroin, possession of cocaine, possession of amphetamines and possession of cannabis.

While I was sitting in the cells below the court waiting to be taken to Holloway, I decided that the best way to cope with the months ahead of me would be to write about them. Looking around the dirty walls of the oppressive cell, I firmed my resolve to remain objective in the face of any difficult experiences. Although I was not always successful in doing so, the knowledge that I might one day write a book was a comfort to me while I was inside.

As the months went by, another motive for writing became equally important. The things I saw and the women I met revealed to me the anomalies and contradictions inherent in our judicial system: not only in prisons, but also within the work of police, magistrates and judges. I wanted to ask my unanswered questions and to make known some of the injustices and degradations suffered by women at the hands of legal authority.

Neither the circumstances of my offence nor the events leading up to my arrest are the subject of this book. Nor is it my intention to discuss my feelings about the offence, although obviously while I was in prison I thought about it a great deal.

My purpose is to show – by describing in detail how I coped with my own sentence, the events that occurred during that time and the people I met – what life in prison

is like. When I was sentenced, I had no idea of what a custodial sentence involved. I hope this account might be of help to other female first offenders on bail who face the prospect of going to prison; and that their families might benefit too. When I was taken from the court to begin my sentence, my parents and sisters had no idea of what was going to happen to me.

Having met a great variety of women offenders – from murderesses to driving offenders – and seen the various effects of prison, I hope to illustrate in this book the way the women's prison system works, so that a lay reader might gain more understanding of its problems and its faults. Although I have suggested areas where reform is needed, the real need for reform goes far beyond the walls of a prison. But I hope that by writing this book I will at least draw attention to a part of our society which is far from perfect and which, affecting the lives of so many, is worthy of greater public concern.

Rosie Johnston
January 1989

PROLOGUE

If someone had told me, before June 1986, that I was to spend six months of my life in prison, I would have thought them an idiot. People went to prison on the News: people who had committed murder or spied for the Russians. Shaky television pictures showed men with blankets over their heads being driven away in vans to prison, but any thought I might have for the criminal ended there, just as news of a flood in India or a factory fire erupted briefly at six o'clock through the voice of Richard Baker, then died away into another world that did not affect mine.

When I was ten, our large house in London, standing back from the road in an oasis of gravelled drive and leafy garden, was burgled while we were away for the weekend. The burglars must have put a child in through the bars of the basement window. The police came round and covered everything in funny silvery powder. They told us not to touch anything in case our fingerprints got muddled up with the criminals'.

And that's what they were to me: criminals, who, if and when they were caught, deserved nothing better than to go to prison. At that time, my shadowy perceptions of jail consisted of visions of cropped-haired men in arrowed suits. Anyone who went there, I thought, must be *really* bad. None of us would ever go to prison, therefore we did not think about it. Even as I grew older words like 'law' and 'justice' meant little to me. We were never specifically taught about them at school.

At the same time as my arrival at boarding school

we moved from London to a draughty old house in Oxfordshire. Mum and Dad saw the potential of the house in Shellingford before my three sisters and I did. We skulked around, missing the excitement of Holland Park and the adventure playground. Slowly, the lifeless rooms that had once been home to the village rector were transformed. Fireplaces were opened up and blazing log fires were lit; the attic was turned into bedrooms for us three older girls. We grew to love the house and the pretty village in which we lived. Our neighbours were friendly and kind; there was a good community spirit.

Every summer, we went to Italy. Mum had bought a small house in the Tuscan hills with some money she had been left by her grandmother. We drove all the way, Mum in the driver's seat, Clara, Lily, myself and Silvy in the back. Dad only allowed himself ten days away from his architectural drawing-board.

It was in Italy, aged eleven, that I first got into serious trouble. We had friends in the local village, mostly boys, since Italian girls weren't allowed out as a rule. We sisters were something of a phenomenon with our freedom to do as we pleased. They all had mopeds: shiny and well looked-after. From the first time I saw one, I wanted a go. It became an obsession, although I was well below the legal age for riding a moped. One night, as a group of us were sitting on the bridge in the village square, something possessed me. I crept off and climbed on to a moped belonging to Stefano, a friend of ours. It was brand new, red and bewitching. I knew how to start it: I had seen the boys do it many times. In the shadows, I revved it up, gently eased it off its stand and was away before anyone could stop me.

The exhilaration was wonderful. I sat on the seat with my knees tucked under the handlebars, the way I had seen the others ride. Acceleration was easy – there was nothing to it – but I could not find the front-wheel light, and as I roared out of the village, the road plunged into

darkness. Suddenly, three figures loomed in front of me. They were girls whom I had seen once or twice in the village shop, taking a quiet stroll. The last thing I remember before being knocked unconscious was their arms outstretched in a last-minute effort to protect themselves from the impact.

My parents, and the entire Tuscan village, were appalled by what I had done. The girls were taken to hospital with concussion, although fortunately none of them was seriously hurt. I nursed a bruised head, and suffered my parents' anger and my own shame. Stefano's moped had to be replaced and I was barred from going down to the village. Two days later, my mother crashed her car on the way to the airport; she had not looked both ways before pulling out into a main road. Our accidents drew us together again and she forgave me.

I had no more brushes with the law until eleven years later when I was again in trouble. This time the circumstances were infinitely more tragic, and the consequences more dire and far-reaching than they had been with the moped incident all those years ago.

1

HOLLOWAY

1

Can you hear me, God? Do you know where I am? This is a single cell in Holloway prison. If you're always so keen to help, then open the bloody door. Hours have passed since it was slammed shut and locked. I am alone and tired, too confused to sleep and too numb to be scared.

I'm not expecting to make friends with the inmates here; my outlook for the next six months is grim. The stories I've heard about prison are relentless catalogues of violence and bullying. Will my voice and background make the other women hate me?

In my cell there is a narrow bed with a stripy mattress. Beside it there is a wooden table and a chair. The closet containing the loo is on the right of the heavy iron door, the barred window is on the left of the bed and table. There is a bucket and a scrubbing brush in the corner and graffiti on the walls.

I've been issued with a brown paper bag which contains soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, shampoo, and a comb. As soon as I was alone, I tried to wash the grime of law courts and prison vans from my face. In my confusion, I thought that the powdered toothpaste was the soap. Now I'll try again with the small white bar of carbolic monogrammed with Her Majesty's initials. It looks as if she has left it here by mistake. At home I'd have washed and brushed my teeth without giving it a thought; in my new surroundings these tasks are time-consuming and laborious. It's as if someone else is inside my body, thinking my thoughts, absorbing the unfamiliarity of this hostile world.

Through the window I can see a small yard flanked on three sides by the prison, several storeys high with barred windows shedding slants of light into the darkness. On the fourth side stands the prison wall topped with barbed wire, separating the inmates from the life of London beyond.

Inside the cell, I lie with my face turned to the wall. I can't tell if I need to use the loo or not. I don't know if I am hungry. Nothing is important except knowing that I am alive.

Level with my gaze are a few scrawled lines of graffiti:

> Frances woz ere i got 5 mounts
> For just bing infolfd
> in a robery wich i did not
> comet and they say
> they i done justice fuck them
> who nows wot justice
> is escepte me
> if you read this you no its the truth.

Distant eerie shrieks reverberate around the yard outside. The cries barely sound human. I hear other voices, nearer to my cell window: inmates are calling to each other through the bars.

'Tracey, I love you.'

'My baby's just been admitted to C3.'

'D'ya hear what they done to Maggie Spools? She done everything she can to fuck up the system, smashed 'er 'ead against the wall, so they sent 'er to fuckin' Mosside.'

'Wassat?'

'Fuckin' loony bin, innit? She got nine years, well six with three off remission, but she ain't never gettin' out now.'

'I got seven years last night.'

'Fuckin' 'ell.'

'Yeah, that's wot I said.'

As I lie here listening, a screw flashes the beam of her torch through the hatch in the door. She passes it slowly from side to side to make sure that I haven't done the cell, or myself, in.

The months leading up to my court case were fraught with uncertainty. On 23 June I was remanded on bail for two sureties of £5,000 and the surrender of my passport. Because of the circumstances leading up to my arrest, hordes of press surrounded our house night and day from then on. Quickly Shellingford was transformed from a dozy country village to a place full of vultures waiting for their carrion flesh. The road was blocked by reporters in their cars, talking to their editors on car phones, making endless forays to the pub, taking photographs of the villagers. Our friends in the village closed ranks. They warned the children not to talk to 'those funny men with cameras around their necks'. They brought us in food, and any able-bodied sons hung around the garden to shoo away the press.

We stayed indoors with the shutters closed, sitting in the dark. It was a hot summmer, but the shutters kept out the heat and the light. We stuck together, my parents, three sisters and I, carrying on as normally as we could, protecting ourselves from the other world, of which I was the focus, the reason for all the fuss. My shocked senses could not absorb what was going on outside. I wanted to close my eyes and sleep for ever.

Dad tried to carry on working as usual, Mum concentrated on running the house under the siege conditions. My three sisters (two older, one younger) tried to cheer me up; to stop me from veering towards panic and despair. Clara, the eldest, was a journalist on Radio Oxford at the time. She was working from home and had a room on the top floor of the house, near mine. She used to talk to me at night or let me sleep in her

bed when I was scared. Lily was working in the fashion business in London. She came home whenever she could and distracted me with stories of what she had been up to. Silvy, the youngest, had just done her A levels and was based at home for the holidays; she, too, was there whenever she was needed.

During my six months on bail, I became terrified of the telephone's shrill ring. If it rang at home, I refused to answer it, convinced that the caller was conveying bad news. Sometimes it rang in the middle of the night. My mother, befuddled by sleep, would answer, as the telephone was by her bed. A harsh voice at the other end was a frequent midnight caller: 'Do you know what your daughter is? You're the filth of the earth, you people, the scum and the shit.'

We were defenceless against such attacks. Nothing could be done to prevent cruel people from behaving like this. We needed to keep the phone permanently on the hook because of my grandmother, who was very ill.

The media, like a biblical pestilence, swarmed around the house. Silvy was followed everywhere she went, as they mistook her for me. There was a heatwave at the time and we were desperate to go outside, so one day Mum decided that, somehow, we would leave the house without the press knowing. One of my father's secretaries, Cari, kept her horsebox at the back of the house. We piled into it and drove out of the gates, straight through their midst, while they ignored it, still craning towards the house for some action.

The police came to the house often to question me. They drank a lot of our beer, and asked a thousand sneaky questions about my friends and their haunts and hobbies. They tried to extract information out of me about people I know and love, and about others of whom I had never heard before. I told them nothing, apart from what I had told them about myself when I was first arrested.

We had to find a barrister, a decision that daunted us all.

Our solicitor, John Simms, recommended someone who turned out to be on holiday. He suggested other people, but we were receiving so much advice from friends as well that we were dizzy from all the different names and recommendations thrust upon us. Eventually, it was decided that we'd be represented by Geoffrey Robertson, a clever and respected barrister. As the date of the hearing drew nearer, we were advised that we would have to take on a QC. We did not know why that was, and it sounded very snobbish and exclusive to me, but we did.

The press coverage continued with bizarre intensity. A photograph of me wearing a see-through body stocking from the waist upwards appeared in a Sunday paper. We tried to see the funny side; my debut as a topless model could not have come at a less appropriate moment.

As the months passed by and the attention from the press increased so did our fears for what would happen to me on the day of the court case. Originally, we had been told by the police and our lawyers that the mitigation in my case would preclude any suggestion of a prison sentence. I had been honest, and had not denied that I had been involved with drugs. My case for mitigation depended on the wording of the offence to which I had admitted. According to legal terminology, there is no word to cover the act of being a courier, which is what I had done. In the end I had been charged with supply, because that, according to the dictionary, means 'to furnish the recipient with the required article'. However, I hadn't been selling or pushing drugs (which is also included in the term supply). I was also a first offender. Gradually we realised that the press was so against us and their influence was so strong that it would take the hardiest of judges to swing against the *vox populi*. We thought in terms of a large fine or a three months' sentence, which we were advised was the norm for a deterrent sentence, but really we knew nothing about it. The first person to open our eyes to what might

happen was my Queen's Counsel. He told us at our first meeting that I would get a year. Mum burst into tears, Dad went white.

I felt as if I was living someone else's nightmare. I registered what he had said, and nodded politely. After the meeting we drove back to the country in silence. Looking out of the window, I could see the cars running normally; the traffic-lights changing colour. There was nothing in the air to suggest calamity.

Mum tried to rise above her shock by writing the lawyer off as a fearmonger. 'They're like doctors,' she said. 'They try to make you fear the worst so that you think they're terribly clever when it doesn't happen.'

Every day my confidence was shattered by new doubts and fears which in turn were replaced with bouts of certainty that I would remain free.

Letters poured in from friends and strangers. The message was common to all of them: keep your chin up, remember you have a loving family to support you, and if you ever need anything . . . Some urged me to turn to God, but I could not. Nor could I find solace in reading. Books lay discarded by my bed or sat in my hand as I stared into space. Otherwise I drank too much and drove my friends mad with maudlin outbursts.

My parents were wonderful. Forever understanding and protective, they suffered more than I did, just to see me suffering. Reproaches and admonishment were not needed; quite apart from all the feelings I was going through, it was punishment enough just waiting for the court case.

Mum took me on outings to see my grandparents. Granny urged me to do everything I could to get to prison. 'It would be such an experience, darling.' Grandpa took me aside. As he was suffering from senile dementia I didn't expect him even to know who I was. 'It wouldn't have happened if you had gone to Cambridge,' was all he said.

In the autumn, a friend and I took the car and drove around Wales and Scotland. Unfailingly solicitous, he had been there to help from the day I had been arrested. It was the most beautiful October I can remember; the roads were lined with trees coloured terracotta, mauve and auburn. By then the date of the court hearing had been set for 5 December, but we didn't talk about it much. Instead we walked on the sand by Portmeirion and played pool with the Welsh lads in the pub.

If none of this had happened, I would have been returning to do the final year of my English degree at Manchester College, an external part of London University situated in Oxford. My tutor had been the very soul of kindness, and had been the first person really to capture my imagination and interest since I left school. I had passed my second-year exams and was looking forward to taking the rest of the papers. In a few short months that life had turned upside-down and was no longer important to me. The halcyon days of student living – sharing houses, parties at weekends and punting on the river – were a past dream of another era. Our crowd had disbanded.

As 5 December drew closer our uncertainty and nervousness grew. There were more meetings with the lawyers. Our solicitor, John Simms, and his wife Trish came to see us as often as they could. I had to have many sessions with John in his office in Oxford. His concern and kindness never failed to restore my spirits.

On the Wednesday before the Friday that I was due to appear in court, I went to see a spiritualist in London. I had given the idea some thought, but had decided to wait until after the case. On the Wednesday morning I awoke with a compulsive feeling that if I did not go that day, it would be too late. I made an appointment and went. The woman I spoke to was kind but nervous. She refused to tell me my fortune, but kept on looking at me as if she was sorry for me. The meeting was auspicious because

as I drove back home that night something inside me, in my unconscious perhaps, knew what the outcome of the case was going to be.

We arrived at the court early, before any of the hacks got there. Chatting quietly together, we made quite a team; both my parents and all my sisters were there, as well as a handful of friends. Clara was going to give a character reference. As she was my sister and had lived with me for the past six months, she was able to give the judge an accurate description of my mental and physical health.

An old friend of ours, Tessa Baring, who was to be another character witness, was also there. I had worked for her part-time in London in one of her charity-run homes, which had been established to give mothers a final chance to prove their capabilities as parents and so prevent their children from being taken into care.

Sebastian Guinness, one of my co-defendants, arrived with his family. We sat in the canteen drinking tea, nervous yet betraying nothing. The third defendant, Paul Dunstan, was being held on remand. He had already been in prison for six months. Outside, the clamour from the press had started. They were livid at having missed our arrival. Both Sebastian and I looked sombre and smart, he in a suit, myself in a black skirt and jumper with a black-and-white checked coat.

The case was called and we all shuffled into the court-room. Tension had reached such a peak that it almost disappeared. I had ceased to be of any importance in the proceedings long ago; nothing that I could say or do would affect opinion or judgement. Lawyers had taken the matter from my hands. The knowledge that the outcome of the case was beyond my control helped me to stay calm. Sebastian and I made our way to the dock where we found Paul Dunstan, with a prison officer standing beside him.

The presentation of our defences did not last long. I

did not listen but remained impassive throughout. The press gallery was jam-packed with journalists frantically scribbling notes. My family were sitting to my right; I could not see their faces. The police stood up in my defence, emphasising that I was not a 'dealer' and had been honest throughout their inquiry. Clara and Tessa also spoke up for me; their voices were quiet in the modern courtroom. I remember there being no natural light, which disturbed me. We had to leave the dock while the judge decided on our sentences. We were escorted into an antechamber, where we sat waiting for justice to be done.

There was a female prison officer with us, attempting to be jovial. 'Don't worry about going to prison if the judge decides on a custodial,' she said. 'It's not that bad.'

Another uniformed woman came into the chamber. 'If that young lady gets a walk-out' (pointing at me) 'we will take her around the back of the court. The police will provide an escort to her parents' car to avoid the press.'

I hoped that it was a good omen; arrangements were in hand for my return home.

My probation officer had prepared a report for the judge recommending that I should do community service. Perhaps the judge had decided that it would be the most appropriate thing. The minutes were dragging, my suppressed nerves were beginning to surface. We shuffled our feet and smoked cigarettes. The door opened and we were summoned back to the courtroom.

The judge dealt with us in turn, starting with Paul Dunstan. 'You are an out-and-out pusher,' was the only phrase I remember him saying to Dunstan; ' . . . four years.' Paul Dunstan had been expecting seven. Surely that was another good sign?

I was next. I stood up and repeated my full name and date of birth. His words hung in the air and then died away, mingling with each other. 'You have suffered enough . . . your learned counsel almost persuaded me

. . . however . . . nine months.' In the second before I was taken from the court I saw my mother slump forward, and glimpsed Clara's face, turned to try to see mine. Nine months: an interminable time.

Sebastian followed me through the door with a sentence of four months' imprisonment. Neither of us believed it.

What now? What were we supposed to do? Kick our way out to our shocked families? Scream and shout until they let us go? We sat in silence, prisoners, no longer the nervous defendants. Neither of us knew where we were going or how we would get there. We were taken down to cells below the court and separated without goodbyes.

My lawyers were allowed to see me. John Simms and his wife were close to tears; my junior counsel was angry; my silk was efficient.

'Now remember that nine months only means six, as every sentence passed in this country has a third taken off for remission. If you misbehave while you're in prison, you will lose days for it. We will file for an appeal immediately.' There then followed a discussion about whether we should apply for bail pending an appeal, or whether I should go to prison and wait for the appeal to come through. The lawyers decided on the latter course and they left me, stunned and lifeless, to be taken back to my cell.

Three hours passed before I was allowed to see my family, and then it was through a pane of glass. Their breath smudged against the window as they pressed their noses to it, their voices sounded muffled and distant. They did their best not to show their shock by jollying me along, urging me to play netball and make raffia baskets. It didn't work. We kept it short so that no one would betray their real fears. They jostled off, mouthing an agonised chorus of goodbyes, and I was left alone, my white face reflected in the glass.

I had not realised that a separation could be that painful: but then I hadn't thought much about saying goodbye if

prison was to be the outcome of the case. No hugs or kisses; no physical contact. Shouldn't partings of that kind be only for people who are a danger to those around them? I wanted to stand up and scream about the injustice of it all, but I went quietly, led by an officer to start my sentence, a new member of a species about which I knew nothing.

After seeing my parents and my sisters go, I cried for a long time. Mum had given the authorities an unopened packet of cigarettes which was passed on to me. Trying to concentrate on smoking without making a mess of it was a way of occupying myself. I burnt my fingers and dropped a cigarette into my cup of tea. Anything was better than thinking about Mum and Dad driving home, exhausted and miserable, wondering what was happening to me.

Near by, a cell door slammed and someone started to cry. It was a woman sounding desperate. As I sat wondering what she had been punished for, my cell door opened and an officer told me to move. I followed her to a smaller, grimier cell, where I found the person whom I had heard crying.

'You might as well be together,' said the officer. 'You're both going to the same place.'

Prison, of course. But which one? I assumed it would be Holloway, but no one had told me for certain. The officer left, locking us in. I stood by the door saying nothing. My cellmate was sitting on the bench in the corner, slumped against the wall. She did not look like anyone I would have expected to see waiting for transport to prison. She was elegantly dressed, with beautiful shiny black hair and a model's figure. I sat beside her on the bench and offered her a cigarette; she had some of her own. We both lit one and sat blowing smoke into the stuffy air. I told her my name, and asked hers. It was Sarah Ray.

'I know about you,' she said. 'My lawyer told me

that I would get the same sentence as you, and that's what happened.'

I also knew her name; hers was also a drug-related offence and my solicitor had said that I would get whatever she was given.

Sarah told me that she had been in court two days earlier and had been sent to Holloway for two days to await sentencing. She had thought that the judge was just trying to frighten her, and that she would get a suspended sentence. She was desperate at the thought of going back, and I was terrified of what lay ahead. Sarah had spent her two days in Holloway in a single cell. She did not talk to anyone, so she had little idea of what to expect from a six-month stretch. I wanted to know details like whether we would be allowed razors with which to shave our armpits. We sat on the bench smoking, wondering what would happen when we had no more cigarettes left. Would we need money? How did inmates pay for cigarettes? I wished I had taken the time to find out about these things. When would we be able to see our families? Did we have to wear a uniform? Sarah said that she hadn't seen anyone wearing one, apart from the 'screws' (two days had been enough to realise that officers were not called officers inside). No one had approached her or tried to rough her up, but then she had been on a wing for unsentenced prisoners, not in the mainstream of the prison.

We made a pact to stick together if we could. She was beautiful, and, as I had guessed, had been a model. She was my age, and we came from a similar background. Because of her reticence and physical appearance, she appeared to be aloof, although after spending hours with her in a cramped cell, I realised that she was just rather shy. If I had met her under normal circumstances, at a party for instance, I would never have thought that we could be friends. Yet in a cell, waiting for transport to hell, I decided that I liked her very much. The value of having

someone to talk to, or just to be with, was priceless.

The waiting was making us fraught; we did not know when we would be leaving or where we were going, and no one would answer our questions.

'Fuck this,' said Sarah, 'I'm going to sing.' She started and I joined in. We lay feet to feet on the narrow bench and sang everything we knew. A screw looked in through the hatch in the cell door. She went away muttering to herself. Sarah and I started to laugh in a hysterical way that might equally have been crying; singing had also been a sort of release for us, a way of relieving the tension.

'How about "New Orleans" to finish off with?' Sarah suggested. As I sang the tears started again.

It was 8 p.m. when the van arrived; we had been waiting since lunchtime. We were escorted to the court car park and bundled into the back of the van. It was cold, and the streets were inky black. We were both freezing: our thin, court-appearance clothes did nothing to protect us from the cold. Our journey was protracted, for we had to go via Reading to pick up two other convicts, Jean and Rita, who had been given four and seven years respectively for smuggling heroin. When they found out the length of our sentences, it was clear that they thought Sarah and I were small fry. They had both been on remand, and so did not have to cope with the terror of uncertainty. They laughed and joked their way to London as if they were on a day-trip to Bangor, while Sarah and I huddled in the back, hardly saying a word. The van rattled along, a grille separating the driver from his unwholesome passengers. I wondered if I would be able to keep a diary. Would they provide writing material for 'cons'?

As we drove down Parkhurst Road, we were given a perfunctory 'Nearly there, girls' by one of the escort screws. I found the word 'girls' humiliating. It reminded me of a school outing, which was the last thing we were on.

It was dark, so I couldn't see much as the van swung

left and stopped outside grey gates. A blue plaque, with the words HMP Holloway, shone in the orange light. The sickly neon guided the van through the security procedure. The first gate opened and shut behind us. We were caught in a vacuum, a prisoners' purgatory, while the guard checked us. The second gate opened and we were in the prison itself. I was hit by a wave of physical terror. My stomach contracted and I gripped Sarah, who looked green in the deceiving light. It was as if a giant hand was pressing a cork into a jar in which I was to be sealed, like a specimen in a laboratory. Shakily, we climbed out of the van and were ordered to wait in Reception. There we were finger-printed, strip-searched and photographed for our 'mug shots'. I did what I was told and followed instructions like a zombie, my eyes blinking beneath Home Office lights.

During the strip-search, I remembered that I wasn't wearing any knickers. The screw in charge was shocked. 'A nice girl like you?' she queried as she issued me with two pairs of cherry-motif prison department pants. Apart from what I was issued with, I had nothing but the clothes I stood up in.

At the next desk I was given my prison number, D29510. I was then sent into a dingy room to await further instructions. I sat with Jean and Rita, who were talking about the 'bloody kangas'. They seemed friendly enough and I asked them what it meant.

'Rhyming slang, love. Kangaroo, screw.' At which they burst out laughing. Jean and Rita knew the ropes. They talked a little about their case, claiming that it had been a set-up. They were really prostitutes, they said.

We were given a plate of doughnuts. I bit into mine and then put it down. 'There's no jam in the middle,' I said, without thinking.

One of the screws overheard and pounced on the chance I had given her. 'Look dear, we are in prison now, not Buckingham Palace.' Jean and Rita thought it

hilarious. I sat miserably, failing to join in the joke.

We were all issued with a bag of toiletries, a towel and a pair of floral pyjamas. Sarah and I had been trailing from desk to desk, screw to screw, without speaking. Just as I turned to say something to her, she was taken away. She was going to a different wing to the one I was to be on. We had forgotten about the likelihood of separation. We did not know if we would see each other again.

2

I had never seen a photograph of Holloway, but I had ideas of what it looked like: Victorian, cold and draughty, with iron bars and flagstones. I was wrong. In 1977, the old building (which had been much as I pictured it) was replaced by a new modern structure, built to the design of a hospital. It was supposed to accommodate 470 inmates, but when I was there the numbers had swollen to over 600. The prison was in turmoil, with staff shortages and insurgency amongst the inmates.

It caters for every kind of prisoner: those on remand, those who have defaulted on fines, those convicted of murder. The majority of women sentenced every day in England begin their sentences at Holloway. It acts as a clearing house, where new inmates can be assessed and allotted to other prisons: the increasing problems with overcrowding mean that prisoners are shuffled about. There are four categories of woman prisoner: A, B, C and D. Category A prisoners are sent to a top security prison, like Durham; Categories B and C to a closed prison, Holloway, Cookham Wood or Bullwood Hall; and Category D are eligible for an open prison. These were the general rules. They were not strictly adhered to, mainly because of the necessity to fill the beds that were vacant.

On the morning of my first day in Holloway, I knew none of this. As far as I knew, I would be doing all my sentence there. I sat on my bed before it was light, fully clothed from the night before, raging against

the impotence of not being able to open the door. I could hear activity outside my cell, as there had been throughout the night: footsteps, coughing, tapping on the pipes, eerie shrieks, which I wondered about. I did not have a watch and had no idea how long I would have to wait until the cell door was unlocked. Half of me longed for the moment when I would be able to walk in the corridor and find someone capable of answering my questions – when could my parents come and see me? How long before I would be able to have more clothes? The other half dreaded leaving the hermetic solitude of my single cell. At least I was safe on my own.

From along the corridor came the noise of keys rattling, and doors being unlocked. Each inmate was greeted with a monotonic 'Morning' – and was expected to reply to show that she was awake.

The routine started with breakfast: murky tea, toast, margarine and marmalade, and porridge for those who wanted it. I collected mine without speaking to anyone. After breakfast we were locked in our cells in order to make our beds, scrub the floor and clean the lavatory. My scrubbing brush, with its ineffective bristles, was as much good as a mouth with no teeth. The smell of detergent reminded me of hospitals: clinical and sanitary. A screw came in to inspect the cell. I asked her about visiting hours. She told me to apply for a Visiting Order. 'Make a Governor's App.,' she said. Then she was gone, locking the door behind her.

I sat on my bed again and waited. It was useless to hope for any explanations. Again I wished that I had taken the trouble to find out about life inside. Perhaps I should have asked my probation officer for a manual that I could have read. Did the screws take it for granted that new inmates would understand the language and abbreviations peculiar to prison life?

Before long, the cell door was unlocked again and I was told that I must see the Chief Medical Officer. In

the corridor there were other new admissions waiting for the same reason. I found myself standing next to a youngish-looking screw.

I took the plunge. 'Excuse me,' I almost shouted, 'but what is a Visiting Order, and a Governor's App.?'

She explained that the App. (application) was the procedure for making any request to the authorities, however trivial. The Visiting Order, or VO, was a slip of paper that must be sent to anyone whom I wished to visit me. We were allowed three visitors at a time for half an hour every fortnight.

The doctor had a set hair-do and a waxy complexion. She reminded me of a character from Cluedo – Mrs White in the billiards room, killed with a piece of lead piping. She asked me if I had syphilis, gonorrhoea, AIDS or any other contagious diseases. I replied that I had a verruca, for which she put me on a course of treatment (although this petered out after a few days). She then questioned me searchingly on the state of my mental health. Was I going to kill myself; and if so, could I give them some warning? Was I going to mutilate myself in any way? Shocked, I replied that I was not going to do any of these things. I wondered if suicide and self-inflicted injury happened often. I returned to my cell, terrified of what might be going on around me.

I sat on the chair by the window, looking out into the yard. The sky was grey and there was a film of drizzle seeping down the bars. A door opened into the yard and a straggle of inmates trooped out on to a concrete path that covered a small area of scrubbed earth. The women started to walk slowly round it, passing screws who had posted themselves at points along the way. Suddenly I saw Sarah, walking on her own, pulling her thin jacket around her. I shouted; she looked up and waved. The next screw she passed said something to her, and pointed at me. I had already broken a rule – shouting out of the windows was forbidden.

Poor Sarah. She looked cold and miserable. I wondered where her cell was and if she had made any sense out of the surrounding confusion yet. The yard was littered with objects thrown from cell windows – plates, knives and blankets. Higher up, I could see the blackened walls of a burnt-out cell. The charred remains were a grisly testimony to what must have happened in there.

As dispiriting as my impressions of Holloway were, I could not imagine being driven to any form of protest as strong as setting fire to my cell. I wondered what happened to women who were that desperate, what they could achieve by arson and whether it was the pressures from within the prison system or from their lives outside that resulted in such dangerous actions.

These thoughts were interrupted by a screw unlocking my door and telling me that I was to go to the canteen. This, I learnt, was the prison 'shop', where inmates are able to buy tobacco, sweets, biscuits and soft drinks. All new inmates are given an advance from the prison department of £1.37. The idea is that they then get a job in the prison – kitchen work, laundry duty and so on – in order to earn more money. All the transactions were done on paper. I was told to apply for a job if I wanted one, and then my money would go up. I bought a packet of ten Benson and Hedges and some matches. The screw in charge also told me that I had missed 'private spends'. Each prisoner is allowed £8 per month in private cash, given by family and friends. This is kept by the authorities but may be used by the inmate to buy toiletries, such as proper toothpaste and shampoo. Because I had arrived shortly after the monthly date for this privilege, I was told to put in an application for 'emergency private spends'.

It was then time to see the Assistant Governor, or AG, as he was known. In this case there were three of them, holding pens and impatiently consulting notes. They

asked me if I had any dietary requirements. Outside I had been on a vegan diet for three months, on the advice of a doctor. I decided there and then that I would stick to that diet if I could. They made a note of it, and told me that it would be seen to as soon as possible. I asked if I would be sent to an open prison. They told me categorically that they never sent drug-related cases to open prisons. Instead I was on the transfer list for a place called Cookham Wood in Kent, or Bullwood Hall in Essex. The only thing I knew about either of these was that Myra Hindley was an inmate of Cookham Wood.

Outside the AG's office, I saw a collection of tatty books on a shelf. I went to pick one up, whereupon a screw immediately ticked me off. 'Never do anything without asking permission,' she warned, then magnanimously allowed me to take a copy. At the time I wished that I had been less of a coward. It would have relieved a part of my anger if I had told her what I thought: that I hated the futility of not being able to pick up a book and look at the cover, the knowledge that my every move was made on the orders of an unknown authority. I remained silent and waited to return to my cell. We were told to eat our lunch in our cells, as there were not enough staff to supervise us in the refectory. For me, that was more of a bonus than a hardship. Other girls moaned, and said that they would complain to the Governor.

We were locked in all afternoon. I tried to read but could not. Instead, I asked a screw through the hatch if I could borrow her pen. On my desk was a piece of lined paper headed with the words HMP Holloway followed by my name and number, D29510. This was a prison-issued letter on which to write home to my family.

I did not know what to write; what would comfort them and make them worry less about me? 'Darling Mum and Dad, don't worry, I haven't been beaten up or attacked by lesbians yet.' I scrapped that, and wrote

what I thought to be a witty account of prison life so far – Jean and Rita the prostitute drug dealers, the doctor asking me about VD.

After that, I tore the brown paper bag which had contained my soap and comb and so on into strips. I wrote down whatever came into my head until teatime.

In the corridor, I was stopped by a scruffy-looking girl with a wall eye.

'Git any baccy?' she asked.

'I've only got these Benson and Hedges,' I replied.

'Wot yer smokin' straights for? Baccy goes a lot further. Let's 'ave one anyway.'

I gave her one of my precious cigarettes.

'Ta. My name's Irene. I'm in fer armed burglary. They ain't goin' to give me bail neither. I 'ad a pucker collection of sawn-off shotguns.' She drew on her cigarette, then shouted 'bitch' at another inmate passing by. 'I 'ate 'er,' she said, then walked away.

I collected my baked potato and beans, and took them back to my cell. Someone shouted, 'Are we going to be banged up all afternoon, or what?' A screw told her to hurry up and go back to her cell. 'Banged up' obviously meant being locked in (a cell). I added it to my growing list of prison shibboleths.

It was dark outside. The prison looked harmless, like a block of flats. I wondered what Mum and Dad would be doing, how they had taken the shock of seeing me leave the dock to start a prison sentence.

At the beginning of October, the daughter of a friend of my parents had gone to prison. She had been found guilty of dealing heroin with her boyfriend. Caroline had been sent to Holloway, and as far as I knew, was still there. Perhaps I could even see her cell from my window.

The silence was interrupted by Jean and Rita, who had been reunited in cells next door to each other, and were indulging in a steady flow of chat which they punctuated

by banging their toothbrushes against the pipes. I lay and listened to their, and other, conversations. A girl in the cell above mine was ranting on about another girl who had been admitted recently. Neither of them was a first timer.

'Tell ya what, she's fuckin' hyperactive, that one. I shared a dorm with 'er once, but she 'ad to go in a single in the end.'

'What's she in for this time?'

'Well, with Jane it's normally criminal damage, innit? Thing is, she ain't got no one on the outside, so when she feels like it, she throws a brick at a police car and comes in 'ere for three meals a day. Christmas is comin' up an' all, so it's not surprisin' she's inside.'

I lay on my bed, despondency settling like sand after a desert storm. The anaesthetic of disbelief was wearing off; misery ached dully in the distance. There was nothing I could do: a day inside was enough to realise that. I felt that I might disappear without trace within Holloway's impersonal walls.

Imminent depression was interrupted by the door being unlocked. Someone rushed in and hugged me. To my astonishment, it was Caroline. She had read about my imprisonment in the papers, and had resolved to see me if she could. 'Don't worry,' she reassured me, 'you'll be all right.' She sat on my bed.

'How did you manage to come and see me?' I asked.

'I'm a blue band, a kind of prefect. I can't stay for long, but I managed to persuade a screw that it would be OK – we have a little bit more freedom to walk around the prison. I've got a job in the library. If you like, I'll see if I can get you one too.' She gave me a book, Arthur Marshall's *Smile Please*. 'This might cheer you up,' she said. 'It made me laugh out loud. And don't worry about all the abbreviations and things that you don't understand about prison. You'll get used to it.'

She stayed for five minutes, but left with a promise

that she would try to get me a job in the library, which stirred a weak sense of hope that things would improve.

After the door banged behind her, I was overcome with panic. Sarah and I had wanted to be together, but that hadn't happened. Would Caroline with two months' experience under her belt be any more successful?

Being locked up without knowing how long for reminded me of being bullied in our childhood games, when someone would end up being locked in a cupboard or a bathroom. If it happened to me, I screamed and kicked until I was let out; but that wasn't going to work in Holloway.

The following days were ones of disorientation as I gradually adjusted to prison life.

When we were banged up, there was nothing to do but wait for the next time the key turned in the lock. Apart from the initial procedures for new admissions, I hardly left my cell. Even meals were eaten under lock and key. Reading was difficult – my concentration was minimal. I spent the greater part of the lock-ups staring at the tacky ceiling, wondering why everything had to turn out this way.

At 2.30 p.m. we had exercise. There was no scope for proper exercise: it was just a slow tramp, tramp clockwise round the freezing yard past red-faced screws and the piles of debris that inmates had thrown out of the windows. At least it was a definite time for being unlocked; the thing I hated most was not being told when I would next be let out of my cell. But I thought of exercise as a double-edged sword. I longed to go outside for fresh air, but I was scared at the prospect of being with a lot of girls at once. At meals, one or two of the inmates had come up to me and asked if I was 'the girl in the papers'. This couldn't be avoided, as a card with the inmate's particulars on it hung outside each cell. Name, age, length of sentence and religion. Once people saw

my card, that was it. Prison gossip, as I learnt quickly, travelled express and was far worse than the whispers and rumours of boarding school. I was going to have to face the music sooner or later. One of the screws had shown me a Sunday paper with a front- and middle-page spread on me and my case. I refused to look. I knew what sort of things had been written. People like to believe what they read whether it's true or not; it would be no different in my case.

The exercise yard was not the same cheerless place where I had seen Sarah moon around outside my cell window. It was the prison netball court, alive with inmates from different wings, exchanging gossip, rolling cigarettes, hugging their friends and co-defendants. I sat on a bench and defeated the object of fresh air by smoking a cigarette.

'Got a light?'

I looked up to see a chubby woman with a rollie hanging out of her mouth. I shared my match with her.

'You shouldn't do that, you know,' she laughed. 'I can tell you ain't been 'ere before.'

I said that I hadn't.

'You should never give anything away in prison, especially if it's someone you ain't never met.' She sat down and introduced herself as Lou. She was in for armed burglary and had been addicted to speed. She was caught at the bottom of a garden with two huge ghettoblasters and some sort of weapon. Because she was stoned, she wasted a great deal of police time by trying to pretend that she was homeless and harmless. She was inside before she knew it.

Another girl, Judy, joined us. She too had been a speed freak. 'Tell yer what,' she moaned, 'I ain't never fuckin' shooting' up in my foot again.' Judy was in for criminal damage. She said it was because she tried to stop a car from running over her dog.

Thoughts of fascism, a police state, Mrs Thatcher,

all made my blood run cold. 'Was that really all you did?' I asked.

'Nah,' was the reply. 'I done in the Old Bill, ain't I? Bit the sarge, then told 'im I 'ad 'erpes so 'e 'ad to go down the 'ospital for a check-up. And I smashed a brick over another bastard's 'ead.'

We all laughed at this, but her story was typical of many that I was to hear. Both Judy and Lou had committed their crimes as a direct result of drug addiction.

Rita, the prostitute who had come in with me and Sarah, came over to where we sat. 'You seen the papers then?' she asked. 'Huge great double-page spread there is on you and all yer posh mates.' But she said it without malice.

Lou and Judy nudged each other. 'You that new reception in that case then? Don't worry love, just keep yerself to yerself, and you'll be all right.'

This friendly advice, when I had been expecting the opposite, made me cry. I mumbled my thanks and walked off, pulling furiously on my cigarette to control the tears. These girls had shown me that there was a certain code among inmates; a solidarity that I hadn't expected. We were all in it together, and that included me.

On the Monday of my first week I was moved from my single cell. I never found out why. My new cell was a dormitory on the same wing, and I was the fourth person to be put into it. I hated the thought of being with other people; a single cell was the best way of keeping myself to myself. At the same time, I wanted to talk to other women, and find out more about how the prison worked.

The dormitory was arranged like a small hospital ward. There were two beds on each side of the room with curtain rails around the top, but no curtains attached. To the right of the door was a small airless closet

which contained the lavatory. To the left of the door was a basin, and a recess which we could use for washing our clothes. Like my single cell, the dormitory was colourless and drab. We each had pinboards by our beds, but no one had stuck anything on theirs. I, like every woman admitted to prison, had been issued with a small handbook which was supposed to be a guide for female prisoners. I had trouble sifting through the endless clauses and sub-clauses, but somewhere I had ascertained that we were allowed eight photographs in our possession to stick on our pinboards. The handbook did not make things much clearer to me, and I wondered how women who couldn't read, or did not speak English well, were expected to cope. The beds had the same scratchy blankets and comfortless sheets that I had had before. There was the same pervading smell of detergent and a clinging, stale odour of BO.

I found myself sharing with two huge Nigerians, Binda and Fula, and a mousy schoolteacher, who whined incessantly. I thought it absurd that someone like her was in prison, doing six weeks for a minor deception charge. She was clearly shattered by being in Holloway, which I understood, but she insisted on going through every detail of her domestic problems and difficulties at work until I wanted to stuff my fingers in my ears.

The Nigerians, who were jolly and giggly, were both awaiting trial for importing drugs. Fula was expecting no more than a year. I didn't want to be the one to disillusion her, but thought it wrong that no one else had explained to her that she was likely to receive a minimum of four years.

It was strange being in a cell with other women after three nights in seclusion. I hated not having privacy, and having to talk if I didn't want to, but Binda and Fula made me laugh, and the schoolteacher, despite her prolixity, was not unfriendly. The next day, Binda and

Fula were moved to a wing for remand prisoners. They flounced off in their multi-coloured national costumes, laughing along the corridor. This was an aspect of prison life with which I quickly became familiar: almost as soon as you found someone you liked, they disappeared to another wing or prison.

Two hours later, the door was unlocked and in walked an ebullient, female Bob Marley look-alike, with long dreadlocks and a rasta armband. She was accompanied by a shy, beautiful girl who could not speak English. The talker, Suzy, was even more voluble than the school-teacher and raved on until midnight. For six hours, the three of us were subjected to a manic monologue about how she planned to bring down the welfare state but was hampered in her efforts by a tendency to smash things when she had her period. She also said that she had an uncontrollable urge to 'flood'. I wondered if that meant she was going to pee on the floor, and if so, whether she would clear it up. None of the other occupants in the dorm said a word and eventually she stopped talking. Instead she amused herself by masturbating, which was just as noisy.

Next day, I tried to help Suzy's mute friend to get a Visiting Order, as she was permanently on the verge of tears, and no one was paying any attention to her. The reassurance of finding myself able to help someone, when I had thought that I would be the one to be always in her position, boosted my confidence. I told her about Governor's Apps, and explained her needs to the Wing Chief.

Returning to our cell, we saw a red flashing light outside the door, and a huge pool of water seeping its way into the passage. Suzy had 'flooded' (at least it was from the tap). A shrill and piercing bell began to ring. Someone shouted, 'It's the aggro bell, they're off!' The bell was used to summon screws to the scene of the crime. There was the sound of rushing feet, and a

cohort of officers careered around the corner, flattening us against the wall, keys jangling.

The cell was unlocked and Suzy was escorted out with her head in the air, displaying pride in what she had done. She was taken away without violent incident to the 'block'. This ominous name was given to a wing of punishment cells. In Holloway, the wing's official name was A1. Spells in the block could be anything from a few hours to days or months. Each cell was bare except for a mattress, and even that was removed during the day.

I was cheered by the arrival of my first batch of letters. I was so pleased to hear from the outside world that I hardly noticed that the letters had been censored. It must have taken the Wing Chief ages – there were at least twenty of them. My mother's letter made me angry. She had sent it the afternoon after I had been sentenced, and it wasn't until then that she had known for certain where I was.

Saturday p.m. Have learnt a bit more. John Simms says that you are in Holloway and I've rung them and got your number, so at least we can write to you. Our trouble is that we miss you, that's about it. Believe me that we all share this with you. You aren't alone and I'm going to be very strong and sensible for your sake as I know how concerned you are for all of us . . .

Mum would not be taking it well, I knew. Her protestations of bravery were to keep my spirits from flagging, as mine were to stop her from going to pieces. Her plight, not knowing what was happening to me, was worse than what I was going through myself. Every moment, Mum would be worrying about how I was being treated, whether the inmates were out for my blood, whether I was a sobbing wreck in need of hospital

treatment. At least I knew that I wasn't and that I was still in one piece.

I put Mum's letter to one side. Soon she would receive one from me, and perhaps worry less. Amongst the welcome pile, there were a large number of letters from strangers, who had written to offer sympathy and support. There were several letters from inmates from other prisons, who wanted to give me advice on how best to do my time. Their situations were far worse than mine, but they urged me to stay cheerful and optimistic.

HM Prison,
Jebb Avenue,
Brixton,
London SW2

Dear Rose,

I know it's hard to find the right words to say at a time like this. From what I gather from the newspapers, you are having a bit of a bad time, so try and keep a stiff upper lip, keep smiling, and try not to let anything get you down. Before you know it, June will be here and you will be back with your Mum. I know it must be strange to get a letter from someone you don't know, but anything is worth a try if it's going to make you feel a bit better, isn't it? Actually, I'm not in Brixton at the moment. I'm in Harlow magistrates' court waiting to be remanded for another seven days, charged with GBH and ABH but I don't want to bore you with my problems . . .

Remember what I said. Keep smiling. It will soon be over. I only hope that I managed to put a smile back on your face. Good luck Rosie,

Love from Kev.

These letters did a good deal to stamp out any lurking feelings of self-pity.

Our letter-writing was rationed to one second-class letter a week, issued by the prison. It was possible to buy extra stamps with canteen money, but 18p out of

£1.37 meant a considerable sacrifice in tobacco. Many of the letters I received from prisoners urged me to write back to them. I couldn't, but hated the thought that I was letting anyone down. Some of them had nobody on the outside to write to, and were hoping that I might become a pen-pal.

A number of the male prisoners I heard from were philosophical and their letters showed their intelligence and love of reading. The Bible was often quoted, as were cult heroes like Bob Dylan and John Lennon. The more reflective among them urged me to stay out of trouble, trust no one and stay cheerful. I wondered what sort of trouble they meant. It was not my intention to cause friction with other inmates; I would not bother them if they left me alone. So far, I had not witnessed, or been the subject of, any cruel or intolerable behaviour but rebelling against the authorities was not something I was going to dismiss out of hand.

As I was reading these letters, a screw came in, barking orders. She handed me a large brown paper bag. 'Pack up your things, you're going to a wing for convicted prisoners.' Another move. It was like musical cells, without music or a comfortable landing.

3

The new cell was another dormitory of four. I walked in, accompanied by a fat, elderly Jamaican woman, also clutching a brown paper sack. She made for the empty bed by the window, which left me with the bed by the door. The other beds were already occupied, by two young black girls.

'What's your name?' the younger of the girls asked me.

'Rosie,' I said.

Her face split into a devilish grin. 'Not that one in the papers?'

I was wary, but her face, with its bright eyes and childish expression, did not look hostile. She was called Stacey, and knew Caroline from going to the gym; the other girl was called Liza. Stacey had been fascinated by the publicity surrounding my case, and was in a state of high excitement. To her, I was a celebrity, and she wasn't going to let me out of her sight.

'Have you ever spoken to black people before?' she asked. I laughed. What sort of a life did she think I'd led? I put her right about her assumption that I must be racist. It didn't take me long to realise that Stacey had given me a leading role in a fantasy that she had created from reading the newspapers. She had taken a prurient interest in all that she had read, and refused to believe that I wasn't an intimate friend of the Queen and Princess of Wales.

'Does the Queen fart?' she asked in a reverential whisper. 'Have Fergie and Andy done it yet? Does she give him blow jobs?'

All I could satisfy her with was a limp, 'Stacey, I don't know, but I expect so.'

She spied my copy of the biography of Lady Caroline Lamb that I had got from the shelf.

'Do you know her?' asked Stacey.

Although Stacey's unquenchable curiosity made me laugh, it was confusing to think that she had an image of me so far removed from the real me. I couldn't blame her; the media were responsible. One paper claimed that I had spent £5,000 a year on my clothes for Ascot, which was odd as I have never been there. It also said that I spent £2,500 in the same year on dry cleaning. I would look less scruffy than I usually do if that were the case.

When I first read such stories I laughed, as I never thought that I would end up in a world where they would have so much effect on the people around me. It was difficult to know how to deal with the disparate images; my supposed profligacy as seen by the press, my intimacy with the Royal Family as seen by Stacey, and my life as I knew it. I longed to explain how things really were, but did not want to get bogged down in confidences that would only sound like whingeing self-justification. The only way that I could dismantle the scaffolding of misconceptions around me was to stay as cheerful, friendly and private as possible. These new rules that I was having to learn to live by were hard to handle. Usually I would have rushed into confidences with someone I liked straight away, and I did like Stacey.

The cell was on the top floor of the prison, and the view was spectacular. Over the wire-topped wall, we could see into the heart of north London. The sky was rose, deepening into rich purple, which emphasised the neon lights flashing the word Odeon somewhere in Islington. It was my first sighting of the outside world for four days. It felt like an age. I could imagine people using the buses and zebra crossings; motorists in the rush hour cursing the traffic, hungry for their supper.

* * *

After tea, we were allowed to stay out of our cells for a while, to have a bath or chat with friends. This was called association, and was one of the listed privileges, but because of the staff shortages, there was no regularity in the times that we were allowed out of our cells, and no guarantee of how long we would be out for. Getting a bath or shower was touch and go; sometimes it was necessary to spend the entire association vying for a place in the queue. Women 'bagged' baths as soon as their cells were unlocked, and queues formed behind them immediately.

On the day of my move to the new cell, I had bumped straight into Sarah in the corridor at teatime. Incredulous to find ourselves on the same wing after giving each other up for lost, we hugged.

'God, I'm glad to see you,' she whispered. 'This place is crazy.'

We had gone to find a bath but were too late. Instead we went to Sarah's dorm and sat on her bed. We spoke in whispers, as Jackie, one of her dorm-mates, objected to the noise level being too high.

'What are the people like in your cell?' Sarah asked. 'The people in here are awful. Do you think we could swap? Who do you think we should ask?'

Neither of us had a clue about the procedure for swapping cells, or whether it was even allowed. I told her about Stacey and her non-stop questions. We laughed self-consciously – we were being watched. A young blonde girl with a woolly cap pulled down over her eyes was slouched on the bed opposite Sarah's. She had a moody face and a protruding lower lip.

'She's a dyke,' whispered Sarah. 'She and her girl-friend are really weird.'

I encountered this girl again when she and a friend stopped Sarah and me on our way back from exercise one day. They had nasty expressions on their faces.

'We don't like you,' she said.

I looked away from her.

''Ere, I'm talking to yer,' she rasped. 'You killed yer friend, didn't yer?'

I was too upset to bother to defend myself. Whether she really believed it or was trying to provoke me made no difference. Sarah squeezed my hand and scowled at both girls. Her height made her an imposing figure, and they let the subject drop.

I found Sarah easy to talk to, although I could tell that she was not ready to reveal much of her personal feelings or life to me then. She admitted that she had been hooked on drugs, but had fought that habit. She was quiet and unhappy, but did not show it in her face.

Stacey on the other hand was a chatterbox. Keen to impress upon me that she was educated, she told me of her schooling at the North London Collegiate, repeatedly emphasising that there was nothing wrong with her intelligence. Only eighteen, she had been in and out of prison for three years. This time she was in for stealing goods worth £2.40. She was sentenced to eight months' imprisonment, not because she had committed the offence herself, she said, but because she had not physically restrained her friend from doing it.

She had lost every ounce of remission for her wild ways and had written an account of her times in prison which she gave me to read. It was as horrifying as watching a serial on television on violence in Los Angeles, with stories of screws in riot gear pinning her down, breaking her nose and shipping her out of one prison because they couldn't handle her there. It went on for fourteen pages. Stacey sat still while I read her account. She never apportioned blame to another if she thought that she deserved it herself, which was on some, but not all, of the occasions.

It was obvious that she was wildly out of control. Even

after the atrocious things that had happened to her, she came back for more. Her cheerful nature and satanic temper were the opposite poles of a muddled mind. I asked her why she had a need to be violent. She said that she didn't know, but that she hated the pigs.

It did not take much to get Stacey worked up. The very sight of a screw was enough to start her shouting, 'Fucking bitch, you eat shit . . . ' and pulling down her pyjama bottoms to moon at whoever was on duty. She also chanted, 'Yesterday's pigs are tomorrow's bacon' for hours on end. Her release date was due in a week's time, so I couldn't understand why she persisted in courting trouble. When she was calm, we had fun, playing cards or doing exercises in the middle of the floor.

Mary, the other young woman in the dormitory, came from Sheffield and had been given three years for importing cannabis. She had never been to prison before and, like me, had heard stories of violence and lesbianism. When we discussed how scared we were of the blatant dykes, all tattooed and masculine, Stacey did not join in our conversation. Later she told me that this was because she herself was gay, but did not want to admit it to Mary, who was revolted by that sort of thing. Stacey told me that she had been raped when she was thirteen, which was why she had become gay. She had had numerous affairs with women in prison and insisted on showing me the love letters that they had managed to pass to her when the screws weren't looking. It was forbidden for inmates to write to each other; those who were caught ended up with a trip to the block.

Stacey explained to me the difference between being 'nick-bent' and 'ordinary bent'. Women frequently became gay while they were in prison, for security and companionship as well as for sex, but a high proportion of the women were lesbians on the outside. Difficulties arose when nick-bent girls had an affair with a bona fide lesbian. The latter would take it more seriously than her lover, who, when

released, would return to her husband or boyfriend.

Mary, on the other hand, was obsessed by her boyfriend Leo, and we were treated to long and detailed explanations as to why he was so adroit in bed.

Talking about sex amused us until late. Stacey and Liza cheered me up with their filthy conversation about 'poopy holes' and the 'grinding' they were going to do when they were released. Mary and Stacey had no trouble with sleep, and dropped off easily, while I lay awake listening to the clattering, shouting and snoring that went on throughout the prison at night.

I was sent to the Special Clinic, a routine procedure for all new inmates. Here they give you an internal check-up. These inspections are hair-raising at the best of times, but my confidence took a bashing at the sight of a bleary-eyed lady with a Twenties bob. As I lay on the couch with my legs apart, she explained that she had lost my womb. After she had found it and told me that everything was normal, I went through to where the blood tests were taken. A concerned-looking lady asked me if I wanted an AIDS test. I nodded without really knowing why. The fact that they were insisting on taking any blood at all was enough to make me nervous. I told the nurse about my fear of needles, and debated whether or not I should kick up a fuss. My sleeve was already halfway up my arm, and the needle poised.

It was all over in a second, without my noticing a thing. Turning to the nurse in relief, I collapsed at her feet. It was a disturbing experience. I can only have been out for a short time, but it was enough to dream that I had been sent to Holloway. I came round, befuddled and woozy, believing the prison nightmare to be over. Those seconds of relief dissolved at the sight of a balding, bespectacled doctor leaning over me, an all-too-familiar bunch of keys around his waist. The lack of colour in my face was worrying him. What was worrying me was a sharp pain

in my lower back. I couldn't sit up, and I was sweating, racked with searing spasms. When I did try to stand, I passed out again. This time when I came round I was under the couch with a blanket over me. The doctor gave me strict instructions not to move. I felt as if my bladder was bursting, but I was not allowed to attempt a journey to the lavatory.

For an hour I lay in agony. No one knew what it could be, or why I was green in the face. When the spasms abated a little, they decided to return me to the wing. Walking was difficult, so the doctor called for a stretcher, but there wasn't one. I was hoisted up between two screws and dragged, groaning, back to the cell.

When we got back to the dorm, the screws unlocked the door and pulled me over to my bed, where I collapsed. Stacey barged over to where I lay, shouting with anger. 'What the fuck have they done to you?' She thought that I had been beaten up. The screws ignored her. They told me that I would have to wait for a painkiller and then left, locking the door behind them.

My cellmates were sympathetic about what had happened at the Special Clinic, but Mary showed indignation, since, a few days before, she had had problems with her stomach and had waited hours before she was seen. When she was at last given something to relieve the pain, she reacted against it and spent the night drenched in her own sweat and vomit. It wasn't until the next morning that the staff agreed to treat her again.

I found the medical care at Holloway slapdash and humiliating, as did many of the inmates. Being prodded, poked, quizzed and assessed by a team of bored and inefficient officials caused all of us to worry about what would happen if we were to become seriously ill.

Liza, in the bed next to mine, suffered from acute constipation, and farted in loud, uncontrollable bursts. Constipation was a common problem among inmates, as a reaction to the change of environment and because of

the amount of starch in the diet. Liza was a strange but likeable old lady. Her crime was to try to smuggle a 'lickol bit of bush' from Jamaica. Huge and fat, she delivered her sapient advice crudely. 'Read dem fuckin' Bible, and don't let no white trash messie wit your pum-pum,' she warned Mary and Stacey. 'Can't win dem blood-clot system. No wise to dem, dey win ye.' This tip was aimed at Stacey who could not quell her urges to 'fuck up the system'. Stacey did not care. Her sole form of expression was shouting abuse at the screws.

Frustrations that caused other girls to scream their anger gnawed away at me. There were times when I wished that I could drop my reserves and do the same thing. I hated the idea that I was appearing to conform, but I could see that shouting at the screws achieved nothing. Their attitude was that we were all in a position of no responsibility; therefore we could have nothing responsible to say.

Letters were still pouring in, and were causing a problem on the wing. Because every letter had to be censored before it was handed to the inmate, other women were not receiving their letters until later than usual because of the amount of time the screws spent going through mine. The hatch in our cell door would open at 3 p.m. and a wadge of letters would be passed to me. Stacey referred to them as my 'fan mail', and asked me to read her extracts from letters that I got from strangers. Flowers started to arrive for me as well, which Stacey arranged in green tin vases provided by the prison. 'More bouquets for the Queen Mother,' she would say, grinning cheekily. I wasn't aware of any overt jealousy from my dorm-mates, but I hated it when their looks of expectancy turned to disappointment when nothing arrived for them. Before long some photographs arrived, which I signed for in the Wing Chief's office: everything sent in for us had to be registered, even if the article was not allowed

by the prison authorities. I stuck the pictures up on my pinboard. There was one of me and some friends on holiday all looking rather drunk, which Stacey adored.

She wanted to know who they all were, what my sisters were called, and why, in one photograph, my mother was sitting in a position which showed her knickers.

Granny, my mother's mother, wrote and urged me to keep a diary as it would be fascinating for those people who knew nothing about life inside. She told me how jealous she was of my experiences. She had always wanted to be put inside but had never known how to go about it.

I still had no paper to write on, bar the brown paper bag which was tatty and crumpled. Stacey told me to apply for an exercise book. Inmates were allowed them for 'casual jottings'. I made my Governor's App. and my request was granted. I was issued with an orange book, reminiscent of the ones we used at school. On it were written the conditions on which it was allowed to be used.

> This exercise book may not be used as a diary.
> No inmate or member of staff may be identified.
> No matter relating to prison security may be discussed.
> There will be no discussion of crime.

I began by copying my illegible scrawl from the brown paper bag. I knew that what I was doing was forbidden, and for that reason took great pleasure in it. It would be my way of doing something wrong. The risk, and the challenge of not getting caught, made the process even more desirable. A time would come when I would have to find a way of smuggling the diary out of the prison. I thought of it all as rather dashing. Stacey, who was in on the plan, thought it was stupid.

* * *

Not long after I arrived in the dorm, Stacey and I went for our first session in the gym together. Gym, like association, was subject to staff availability, and so the sessions were sporadic. Generally, it worked so that different activities were allotted to certain times of day: keep fit in the morning, volleyball in the afternoon and so on. I enjoyed the gym and wrote about it in my next letter home. Physical exercise was better than letting simmering thoughts of rage and impotence come to the boil while locked in a cell. Besides, it was a step towards the netball goal that Mum had tried to joke about on our last meeting.

Stacey was very athletic and lived for her sessions in the gym. We bounced around on a trampoline, played volleyball, and joined in organised relay races. To my delight, I won a badminton competition. It meant beating Stacey, which worried me. She stopped smiling and stalked off into a corner. Her legs and arms were muscular, and she did her best to excel at everything. She said it was her ambition to be a PE instructor.

Unfortunately, although Stacey must have worked off some of her physical aggression in the gym, it wasn't enough to prevent her from giving in to a bad burst of temper. One morning, she spat in a screw's face. She wasn't upbraided for this, although she should have been. She began to build up an obsession that she was going to be taken to the block, and at teatime she did not collect her food with the rest of us, but ran down to the end of the corridor and refused to budge. Mr White, one of the few male discipline officers in Holloway, was in charge. He asked Mary and me to go and talk some sense into her; otherwise, he said, he would have to ring the aggro bell. We persuaded her back to the dorm, but by that time association was over and there was no more tea left. Stacey started to scream, accusing the screws of trying to starve her. Mary tried to explain that her tea had been there, if only she had gone to collect it,

but Stacey refused to listen. She threw off her prison department slippers and replaced them with a hefty pair of trainers. She began to kick the cell door like an angry bullock. The door was unlocked and a screw came in, whom none of us had seen before.

'Stacey, you're going to A1 now. Will you come quietly?' She spoke softly, avoiding using the inmates' term for the punishment cells.

'No,' was Stacey's unequivocal reply.

'Well then, we will have to take you.'

'Take me then.'

During this exchange, Stacey was edging towards her locker, on top of which she had a plastic knife, fork and spoon that she had taken from the refectory. Five more screws barged into the cell, including the burly Mr White, and advanced on Stacey. Pandemonium. She lashed out with the cutlery, stabbing one of the screws in the face. The screw fell backwards with blood dripping down her chin. The rest of them jumped on Stacey and forced her into the restraint position, although she managed to kick and wind another screw before they overpowered her. Mr White grabbed her leg and locked it. Stacey was yelling, her voice raw with agony. She was dragged into the corridor and pulled by her hair to the lift. The last I saw of her, she was writhing around, screaming at them to let go of her hair. During the whole episode I lay on my bed, horrified by the violence I was witnessing. Mary had covered her face with her hands and was shocked into silence. Liza, in her usual position by the window, showed no emotion or surprise, but sat there quietly, talking to herself.

I cried for Stacey. She had been my friend and had welcomed me without reserve into the dormitory. Liza told me not to waste my tears. She said that Stacey had brought it upon herself. To me, that was the saddest part of it. It was clear that she didn't want to go home and that, in spite of her attitude towards the authorities,

she was happier inside. Her good education and nice house in Harrow were useless to Stacey: her parents had disowned her. A girl whom she had had an affair with during one of her spells inside had offered Stacey a place to stay, but she was a junkie. Prison provided Stacey with a secure and structured life, however hard it was to accept the nature of that life at the time. The gym was her passion and she enjoyed the fact that she was a somebody: everybody knew about Stacey and her violent outbursts.

The cell was very quiet after Stacey had gone; she left a gap. The atmosphere on the wing became tense because the screws were nervous of repercussions amongst the inmates. As soon as it happened, the drama was being relayed around the prison by girls shouting out of the windows: 'Hey Donna, did yer 'ear what they done to Stacey? Yeah, they dragged 'er off screaming . . . '

Mary said that it was likely that Stacey would be charged with assault at an outside court, in which case she would be inside again before long, probably somewhere tougher, like Durham top security. The incident left a sour taste in my mouth.

The next day was a Sunday, and I decided to go to church, to help me calm down. Without realising it, I was beginning to use the Sunday services as a crutch. It wasn't that I was becoming suffused with religious fervour, it was just that it was the most civilised and tolerable place in the prison. I didn't have to talk or think, only sit and stand as commanded, and sing the hymns. After the service, I went to confession. Again, the motive for this lay outside religion. I wanted to talk, but anonymously. I explained this to the chaplain, who was kind and sympathetic, before we began. I wanted no moral judgements or Ave Marias but an ear for my troubles. It was the first time that I had spoken uninhibitedly since I was sent down. In order to protect myself and

adapt to prison politics, I was having to develop new and tough characteristics. My acquired reticence proved to be vital, as members of the press waited outside for girls being released to sell them stories on how I was coping with my sentence. I had a letter from my sister Clara, who had come to the prison to drop off some clothes for me. She said that Holloway was surrounded by journalists parked on double-yellow lines and hanging around the pubs. The only people benefiting from them were the landlords and the wheel-clamp units.

Unfortunately, the clothes that Clara dropped off did not get past the authorities. My leather jacket was a maze of torn pockets and zips which the officers thought could hide any amount of contraband, hacksaws or drugs. Perhaps they thought the other clothes would lower the tone of the prison: the whole lot were turned away. I was still in the clothes that I had worn to court and I didn't know how long it would be before I got some new ones.

One afternoon I was sitting in Sarah's dorm during association. We both heard the sound of a guitar, so we walked along to the cell from where we had heard the strumming. There we found a tired, burnt-out ex-junkie in her forties called Gail. She was delighted to find someone else who was interested in the guitar, so we sat with her until the end of association, singing and taking it in turns to play.

As I started on 'The Streets of London', a gravelly-voiced woman in a mini-slip walked in, her limbs puffy from injecting herself with drugs. Not knowing what to expect from this acerbic-looking character, I turned to Gail. Neither of us had anticipated her asking me to start again at the beginning. 'The Streets of London' was this woman's favourite song.

We sang, accompanied by the mini-slip woman. Her voice was deep and off-key, but she gave it everything she'd got. In the end, there were a number of people squashed into Gail's tiny cell. Sarah and I sang some of

the songs that had helped us to pass the time at Oxford Crown Court.

This impromptu sing-song did much to restore our morale. Most of the inmates enjoyed music and singing, whether it was hymns in church or a raucous dirty ballad when they were banged up. For me it was a way of escaping from my prison persona. There was no danger of revealing anything of myself while belting out a rendition of 'Me and Bobby McGee'.

4

One evening my Prison Visitor arrived at the hatch of the door. While I was on bail, I had worked in London for three days a week for an organisation called St Michael's and All Angels, which helped mothers who, in most cases, were having to overcome a variety of mental and physical problems like alcoholism and drug abuse, to become responsible for their children. During my time there, I met many people who selflessly devoted their time to others, one of whom was a woman I shall call Mrs P. She knew that I was on bail, and that there was a possibility of my receiving a custodial sentence. It turned out that she was a Prison Visitor – that is, that she went voluntarily to see prisoners who otherwise might not have anyone visiting them – and she often went to Holloway. Every inmate is entitled to have a Prison Visitor, so when I was asked if I wanted one, I immediately thought of Mrs P. I applied to be on her list.

I was delighted to see her. Because of staff shortages I was not allowed out of the cell to talk to her, but we communicated through the letterbox gap. It was Mrs P who told me that my parents had received the Visiting Order that I had sent them and that they would be coming to see me the next day. Having some knowledge of what was going on outside was like being hauled back to semi-normality. Mum and Dad were coming to visit; that was a step in the right direction. I was frantic to see them and reassure them that I was all right. On a more practical level, I needed more clothes. I looked dreadful, and the constant smoking of rollies (I

had abandoned the luxury of Benson and Hedges, since they didn't last long enough) was beginning to make me feel like a lavatory attendant.

After Mrs P left, I was in high spirits. Her eccentric charm was infectious and she had been the bearer of glad tidings. All that night I lay awake experiencing for the first time the build-up of excitement before a visit. I could imagine Mum and Dad planning the journey to London, leaving at the crack of dawn in order not to be late.

The next morning, I was on the list to see the doctor, who wanted to check that everything was all right after my collapse at the Special Clinic. As I was standing in the queue, two girls came up to me.

''Ere, my friend fancies you. Are you game on?'

I could tell by their dilated pupils that they were on drugs, probably heroin. I knew that drugs were being used, as many of the women on the wing were obviously stoned. I had also overheard inmates offering to swop 'gear' for tobacco or sweets. One method of getting drugs into the prison was by swallowing them. The disadvantage of that was that if a screw suspected an inmate of having swallowed drugs, he or she could segregate the inmate on the hospital wing and wait until it came out the other end. A more foolproof method was known as 'crutching', which meant stuffing the drugs in the vagina: screws are not allowed to search inmates internally without prior permission from the Home Office.

During her first night in Holloway, Sarah had shared a cell with a girl who had had half a gramme of heroin lodged down the back of her throat. She swallowed some shampoo and sicked it up. Some of the screws were tolerant towards cannabis smoking, and were even known to pass cannabis between inmates during a bang-up. Smoking kept the level of tension down. There were also reported to be cases of screws turning a blind eye to it if they were sexually involved with an inmate who was a cannabis user.

The two girls who claimed to be interested in my body stood staring at me, their mouths hanging open. Their proposition was absurd. Even the most sex-starved individual could not have fancied me looking the way I did. My turn to see the doctor saved me from anything more embarrassing. I was declared to be fit, and returned to the cell. The prospect of my parents' visit stopped me from thinking about the incident too much. It was something that I had been vaguely expecting to happen, only in a more aggressive and persistent way. In fact, the other lesbians on the wing were a far cry from the butch aggressors I had imagined. Their crew-cuts and tattoos belied their friendliness. It was the first time that I had had any form of contact with lesbians.

The visit with Mum, Dad and Silvy was terrible. Silvy arrived looking beautiful, wrapped in old pieces of fur with a characteristic assortment of brooches and buckles attached to her clothes. We sat at a table, but I was separated from them by a partition, only there was no glass in it. Hugging them was difficult but we managed a few clumsy embraces.

Officially we were allowed half an hour, but we squeezed forty minutes as the visiting room wasn't overcrowded. If a large number of girls were expecting visits, a table had to be cleared every half an hour. Each second was frantic; not one could be wasted. Mum wanted to ask me some administrative questions, such as where were the keys of my car, and what was my bank manager's address. She took out a pad on which to write the answers and was pounced on by a screw for breaching prison security. Mum and Dad, not understanding prison restrictions, had brought me a large bag of comestibles: fruit, soya milk, things that they knew I would not be able to get hold of. That caused a laugh or two, but they had no idea of what I was or wasn't allowed. As parents of a first offender, they were given no guidelines as to what the most useful things to bring might be. No one

had told them why my original bag of clothes was sent back; they had thought that they would be able to leave me some fruit. Compared with me, Mum and Dad were completely in the dark. What they needed was a clearly defined set of rules which could have helped them get to grips with the do's and don'ts: for instance, I was not allowed either copper-topped batteries, as it is possible to make bombs out of them, or spiral-bound notepads, as they are potentially lethal weapons. A great deal of time was wasted by itemising and signing for parcels from which no one ever benefited.

I spent most of the visit reassuring Mum and Dad about the state of my mental health and regaling them with stories of my antics in the gym. Then it was over, just as we were warming up. It was dreadful seeing them walk out into the fresh air to return to the comfort of home. I was ordered to remain seated until they had left the room, then I was escorted into a small room to be 'rubbed down'. We had to take off our shoes and have the soles of our feet inspected. When the screw was satisfied that I was not trying to conceal anything, I was marched back to the cell and banged up. If it was bad for me seeing my parents under those conditions, it was worse by far for them; the last place on earth they would have expected to visit one of their daughters was in Holloway prison.

I was longing for a fag, but the cigarette situation was hopeless. Because canteen happened only once a week, there was always a period of about two days when everyone was low on tobacco. Inmates would come around scrounging, for fags, rolling papers or matches. My blood was tingling at the thought of laying my hands on a stub end. The wage system struck me as ridiculous: we were on a reduced scale of wages, but were being charged shop prices at the canteen. I could imagine how the authorities enjoyed watching us scrounge, scrabble around in ashtrays or plead for a puff. It would have

reduced the agony of longing to have been a non-smoker, but that would have meant missing the intense pleasure of sitting on my bed gloating over a full pouch of Golden Virginia on pay day. Hardly anyone was too proud to beg. Inmates who borrowed tobacco and did not pay it back quickly acquired a bad reputation. Those who became renowned for lending tobacco were severely taken advantage of. There was no way of winning.

That night we persuaded the screw on duty to pass us some of the butts left in the ashtray in the Wing Chief's office. We were rewarded for our persistence with one or two long ones that had obviously been stubbed out in a hurry. The screw, who on this occasion broke the strict rule of not giving anything to inmates, was one of the only officers that I can remember individually from Holloway. She was genuinely kind and sympathetic.

Mary and I spent most of the night trying to mete out our meagre supplies; we ended up by having two puffs each every half an hour. Sleeping was difficult. Whenever I did manage to doze off I had vivid and unnerving dreams. I was always tired in the mornings, as sleep afforded no rest.

The following morning the cell door was unlocked after breakfast – a time when we were usually banged up. A screw came out and called me into the corridor. I hated being singled out: at school, it always meant trouble. As far as I knew, I had done nothing wrong, but I was quaking when I left the cell. I needn't have worried. It turned out that Caroline had persuaded the screw in charge of the library that they needed an extra pair of hands. Reg, a young man from the education department, had come to escort me there. I was to start work on a temporary and unpaid basis until one of the girls left in January. The fact that I wasn't in trouble but was being given the chance to leave the cell every morning was heartening indeed.

My first morning was spent getting to grips with the numbering system used for arranging the books. It wasn't difficult, and I worked my way through a number of shelves – to Caroline's joy, as she was responsible for my appointment, and for my subsequent success or failure. The morning went quickly. It was a strange experience both for Caroline and for me to find ourselves working together in the Holloway library. It was a far cry, I noted with wry amusement, from the children's tea parties that we used to go to in London, where we ate mounds of sandwiches, cakes and crisps, and ran around gardens with other children dressed in velvet dresses and lacy tights.

All too soon, Reg reappeared to take me back to the wing, but on the way back we went via the music wing, where we spent some time before he returned me to my cell. I was nervous that we would get into trouble: after all, he had not asked anyone's permission to show me the music block. He told me that his authority was good enough. Being an education officer, he was not a member of the discipline staff, and I found it odd being in the company of an un-uniformed officer. It is hard to explain how carefree I felt, talking to someone who treated me like a rational, intelligent creature. The music block was like walking into Hamleys toy shop after the drabness of the cell. There was an electric guitar which Reg plugged in and let me play, an acoustic guitar, a cassette recorder – things which may not sound exciting now but they appeared so to me then. As I was twanging away on the guitar, a girl entered the room. She was called Angie, and as soon as Reg introduced us, she became animated.

'Oh, I know your co-defendant, Sebastian Guinness,' she exclaimed. 'He was at school with my husband, Roger.'

I doubted her word, as throughout my long friendship with Sebastian he had never mentioned a Roger or an

Angie. Still, it was a good premise on which to start a conversation. She had been on remand for ten months for being 'just your friendly neighbourhood smack dealer'. She told me about the drugs circulating around Holloway, and how easy it was to set up a racket inside. This was mainly done through remand prisoners who, because they were not convicted, were allowed privileges. They could be visited every day, and have food parcels sent in. One of their perks was the allowance of half a bottle of wine a day to go with a meal. Angie used to save hers up and get plastered once a week. Their visitors would 'see them sweet' – by bringing them drugs which they would either use themselves, or barter for tobacco or sweets.

She told me about the 'muppets', the prisoners on the psychiatric wing, C1. A year before I went to Holloway, a woman had been put on the C1 after being convicted of arson. She had started a fire in a garage because she wanted to go back to prison. All her friends were inside. When she was put on the psychiatric wing she became very upset. For twelve hours she screamed, begging for attention. She was ignored, and finally hanged herself. The coroner's verdict on her death was 'accidental death, aggravated by lack of care'. I could not understand why the women on the psychiatric wing were not sent to a proper psychiatric hospital, instead of to a prison where the staff are not able to help mentally disturbed women. To have a psychiatric wing in a prison is surely archaic and inhuman. If women reach a point so low that they spend their time naked, smearing their own excrement on the walls and pushing it through the bars of their cells, they need to be taken somewhere where proper medical and professional treatment can be given.

Women on C1 were not allowed to possess matches. Angie told me that she had a friend on C1 to whom she used to lower lighted cigarettes in a plastic mug with string attached to the handle. Her friend had recently had a crayon surgically removed from her nose, where she

had shoved it by mistake. The muppets were responsible for the eerie shrieks and wails that I had heard on my first night. Angie told me that they 'bung 'em up with drugs during the day, to keep 'em quiet'.

Reg was organising a Christmas concert for the muppets, and asked Angie and me if we would like to take part. Angie had a good singing voice and had written a song called 'The Holloway Blues'. She had also formed a prison band called the 'Oily Rags' which she asked me to join. I welcomed another diversion and accepted at once.

On the way back to the wing, Reg took me along a corridor that had a glass window at one end, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. This, he told me, was known as 'wind-up corner'. Through the window I could see the busy street outside; buses roaring past, crowds of people laden down with last-minute Christmas shopping. This unremarkable scene of city life was only a few yards from where I stood. It was as if I was watching it from Mars.

Back on the wing I was collared by the Wing Chief, who told me that a parcel of clothes had arrived and been accepted. Clara had organised the parcel and had not forgotten to put in my little black hat. I was happier to see the hat than I was to see any of the freshly washed and ironed shirts or skirts. It was like being reunited with a friend. It didn't leave my head for days, even when I went to bed.

Stacey's corner had been filled by a new reception, a black girl called Brownie, who had been given eighteen months for cannabis importation. Mary, who was serving three years for importing the same amount, started a vehement denunciation of the arbitrary methods of sentencing.

I was dumbfounded by what I overheard. Mary had been charged with importing fifteen kilos of cannabis, but when she came to court, she had only seven kilos

written on her charge sheet. Of course she was not going to stand up and say, 'Well actually, your Honour, I brought fifteen kilos into the country.' It was as if Mary had been an unwitting pawn in a sinister game played by the Customs and Excise. Many of the girls that I met during my time in prison had encountered the same thing. What were Customs and Excise doing with the missing drugs? It was unlikely that the defendants were supposed to believe that the discrepancies between the original amount of imported drugs and the amount that was read out in court were the result of any altruism or sympathy on the part of the customs officers.

It seemed to me that their motives for concealing drugs between finding them and giving evidence in court were suspicious. One theory was that they were building up a supply of cannabis to be used by the police for planting on people. I knew someone who had been awarded damages by the police some years previously because they had accused him of possessing something which they themselves had placed on him. Other inmates thought that the officers were simply selling the drugs for a vast profit. Because the inmates who had been through this with Customs and Excise had no explanation for what had happened, it was hardly surprising that they should think the worst.

What really angered me was the stupidity of sending drug offenders to prison at all, when the majority of the inmates who had been involved with drugs on the outside needed help or rehabilitation of some kind and prison was the last place they were going to get it.

During the conversation they talked about the judges. Mary had been sentenced by a female judge who handled a large number of drugs cases. She was well known amongst prisoners for looking at her watch, being impatient throughout trials, snapping at juries and handing down large sentences to anyone who came

before her. No one in Holloway had heard of the judge who sentenced me.

When Brownie latched on to the fact that I was 'the girl in the papers', she really let me have it. Launching into a diatribe against rich people, she used Lord Mountbatten as an example of what she thought was money buying freedom. I assumed that she meant Lord Blandford. Although she would rather that I had got three years as opposed to nine months, she made it clear that she was glad that I was in prison at all. She drew Mary and Liza into her argument, and they proclaimed disgust at my high-flying lifestyle. I was powerless to stem the flood of abuse. Brownie had stirred a reaction, particularly in Mary, so I sat there, weakened by their contempt for me, Brownie's verbal dexterity crushing my efforts at self-justification. Her bitter invective was largely tainted by her attitude towards being black, and by my being supposedly upper class. She treated me as though I were responsible for the divisions between black and white, rich and poor. Finally she shut up and sat on her bed, glaring at me, her nostrils flaring. Although she made me feel useless and weak, her face looked so funny that I had to hide under the bedclothes so that she wouldn't see me laughing.

I wondered about the possibility of moving into a single cell, or sharing with Sarah, if there was a space. Having no rapport with the officers, I did not know who to approach. The screws looked exasperated if anyone asked them anything. The atmosphere in the dorm had been polluted by Brownie, and I was irritated by the sheep-like acquiescence with which Mary and Liza followed her lead. As at school, it took just one person to infuse a sense of dissatisfaction in those around them.

It wasn't only in the dorm that the ambience was restless. There had been less association than usual, and the lack of any fixed routine made many of the inmates

aggressive. During tea, there was an undercurrent of tension. There was more 'slagging-off' than usual, more surly expressions. As I scraped the remainder of my baked beans into the slops bucket, I heard screams from behind me. Two girls, one of them Brownie, were snarling and spitting at each other. Threats turned to violence and they locked together, biting, kicking and scratching. Brownie's teeth were clamped on to her opponent's arm. The aggro bell rang and the next moment five screws barged into the refectory, scattering inmates and shouting orders. Scared of a chain reaction, the screws wasted no time in locking us in.

Brownie was virtually thrown into the dorm by a couple of hefty female screws, where she gave us two versions of what had happened. One was in the Jamaican dialect, and one was in English for my benefit – not that it was easy to understand owing to the revved-up state she was in.

The commotion had started because Brownie had taunted the other girl about her efforts to get a girl from another wing into bed. It was the same girl who had propositioned me. I was astonished that this could have sparked off such a fight, but Brownie put it down to the fact that 'She's a blood-clot junkie, and ain't gettin' no gear'. Brownie's fight, as were many others, was caused by a stewing pot of drugs and lesbian longings.

After the fight, the atmosphere in the dorm improved. Brownie proved herself to be quite an entertainer, and she was generous with her tobacco supply. For the first time in ages, we luxuriated in being able to smoke a whole cigarette each. She amused us with stories about her life on the outside. 'I never fight wit de blood-clot woman on de outside. I fight wit de man, and I lick him good.' I didn't doubt this: her strength matched her aggression. She liked giving men a hard time, and wouldn't consider having sex until the man had proved himself worthy

because, she maintained, 'it be a diamond down dere!' (flinging her legs apart and pointing at her crutch).

Because Brownie had been in a fight, she knew that she would be punished by a spell in the block. Like Suzy the flooder, she did not appear to mind the prospect of going there. She said that she wanted to do her 'bird' with dignity.

'Bird', I discovered, was another way of saying 'time'.

I was still finding it hard to get to grips with the prison slang. An obvious one was 'jam roll' which meant parole. But I never worked out why a cell was called a 'peter' or a cigarette a 'salmon'. I asked screws and inmates alike, but nobody knew the answers. 'Yes' was often 'yow', and 'great' or 'brilliant' was 'blinding', 'ream' or 'pucker'. A typical meal was 'dead pig' and 'bullets' – pork and peas. In letters or notes, any attempt at a joke was followed by 'HA HA' in capital letters and a small round smiley face. Swear words were dotted around in every sentence. Screws didn't object to swearing if it wasn't aimed at them, but they did object to hearing themselves referred to as screws. I once called an officer a screw to her face by mistake.

'Don't you ever call an officer that,' she bellowed.

'All right, kanga then,' I replied, losing my head. Her face changed colour; I scarpered.

Although the AG had told me that I was on the transfer list to go to another prison, I did not want to move. I was enjoying working in the library and Caroline had told me there was a chance that I might be given a blue band in January. Already the status of blue band had become a high aspiration. The thought of having a little more freedom to walk around the prison was too much to hope for. A liberty such as this, so meaningless on the outside, had become a luxury in less than two weeks.

I did not know how to go about trying to stay and

Caroline suggested that I write a petition to the Home Office, which is every prisoner's right. As well as working in the library, and the possibility of being a blue band and spending more time with Caroline, there was also the music block and the concert for the muppets to help distract me; and Caroline had introduced me to the head of the education department, who had said that he would be willing to give me tutorials along the lines of the ones that I had had at university before I was arrested. All these elements of distraction promised that the time would pass quickly. I submitted my petition in a confident mood, thinking that I had put my case eloquently. If the education was really as good as the prison authorities thought it was, I wanted to stay and take advantage of it. Maybe I could even be useful in some way, by helping inmates who could not read or write to achieve some degree of literacy.

Christmas was approaching. I overheard one of the prisoners reading from a newspaper.

'It says here that Rosie Johnston will be spending her Christmas in Holloway prison amongst thieves, murderesses and prostitutes,' she read. 'What about us bloody drug offenders, I'd like to know?!'

I shrivelled into the wall but was amazed to find that I wasn't sought out and roughed up. It was as if the press attention given to the prison excited everyone. They were inadvertently a part of the sensationalist stories.

A carol service was planned. Angie and I were allowed to help Reg and some nuns fix up the microphones and speakers. The nuns had come to help organise the service and to offer what comfort they could to the prisoners at Christmas time. There were two inmates on the stage taking part in last-minute rehearsals. One of the nuns asked her how she was going to stage the nativity scene.

'Well I dunno what we're going to do really,' she replied. 'Half the angels and shepherds are down the block.' I wondered if the Virgin Mary was intact.

Whilst I was relatively cheerful, Sarah was low. I felt guilty about her, as if I had neglected her, because of my exploits in the library and the music block. Somehow, I had become more involved than she had, and the time I was spending away from the cell prevented me from becoming despondent. But in my excitement over possible diversions and applying to stay at Holloway, I had more or less forgotten about my initial close bond with Sarah. I tried to atone by offering to get her involved with Reg and the education department, but she wasn't enthusiastic. Holloway to her was a nick, with possibilities only in boredom and frustration. I persuaded her to come to the carol service that night, as it would at least be a chance to leave her cell.

The night of the carol service was dreadful. A girl called Sophie was sitting in the row in front of us. Sarah nudged me and said that she had overheard Sophie bitching about me. We both expected trouble, and we got it.

''Ere,' she turned to face me. 'You're dirty.'

I was speechless. I knew that I had a reputation on the wing for being scatty, and I was not, like some of the inmates, manically tidy with my possessions. I could never muster up the enthusiasm to take a pride in the cell, whereas other women would scrub, polish and rearrange as if they were expecting someone from the outside to appear from nowhere. But these accusations were not fair, so I rose to Sophie's bait and swore at her.

'You don't wash,' she repeated. She was another one with the boarding-school bully mentality and I recognised her insults for what they were. Girls can take all sorts of bitchiness, but when the question of hygiene arises, anyone who is considered unclean is a leper. I did my best to ignore her, but she carried on sniggering throughout the service.

The service itself was haphazard. Inmates heckled their way through the readings, cheered loudly if a popular inmate took the stage and booed if it was a woman that

they did not like. The hymns were sung as cacophonously as possible. All I wanted to do was to run from that crowded hall, away from the screaming women.

It was impossible not to imagine the pre-Christmas build-up at home: Mum in her nightie sitting by the fire with a glass of cider; Silvy sloping around the house with her cat, Ella, clinging to her right shoulder; Dad poking at the carpet's tatty edges with his walking stick; Lily singing along to a Louis Armstrong record; and Clara working on a news item for Radio Oxford. In one of her letters, Mum had written that she wouldn't be celebrating much that year.

It wasn't often that I managed to see a newspaper, as the ones we had on the wing were usually bagged by other girls, but I was aware of the continuing press interest in my 'prison plight'. It wasn't going to make it easier for my family to have a peaceful Christmas.

In the dorm, I sulked, as Mary wouldn't let me play the guitar that Reg had let me have from the music block. 'Can it,' she yelled, as I struck the first chord. 'That din drives me mad.' She droned on about her fitted carpets and the amber lighting scheme in her front room. Liza was listening to the traffic news for the tenth time that day. Whatever I might have been able to do in the library, or in the education department, nothing compensated for the fact that I was not able to open the door and escape the crackling wireless and Mary's scorn. Liza had taken her false teeth out and placed them on the window ledge. On her head was a pair of baggy grey knickers. At any other time, I would have found that funny, but I was sickened by having to be constantly exposed to the habits of others, however harmless. Mary spent the rest of the night shouting to a friend on the floor below at the top of her voice. There was no peace, no chance of drifting off into a dream world.

Mrs P, my Prison Visitor, visited me again and as she

came during association hours we were able to sit in the television room. I told her about my Home Office petition and she thought it was a very good idea. She was full of praise for the Holloway education department. She didn't know how likely it was that my request would be met. I was touched by her visit. Christmas was drawing nearer and the traffic in the streets must have been choc-a-bloc. She said that she would not be able to come again before Christmas but, provided I was still here, she would see me soon afterwards. Because of her busy schedule, Mrs P very rarely visited women who had been transferred to prisons outside London. She promised to ring my parents that evening and tell them that I was bearing up.

I was cheered further by the arrival of a huge waxy orchid from a family friend called Nigel. I found out later that he had tried to send me an orchid in a pot some days earlier, but it had been returned to the florists because the authorities suspected the bulbous roots of containing drugs.

Within an hour of the orchid arriving, my mood of optimism had turned to one of despair. I was sitting on my bed, surrounded by cards and flowers, when a screw came into the dorm. She told me to follow her, as I was to be fitted. I was startled. I thought that people were fitted for false teeth or Dutch caps; I had no need for either.

'You're going to Bullwood Hall tomorrow,' she said. I stared at her. 'Come on, hurry up. The doctor's waiting and he hasn't got all day.'

'But I've petitioned to the Home Office . . . I sent it a few days ago . . .'

'Never mind that now. Come along please.'

I could see that I was facing the brick wall of authority, and that it was pointless trying to bang my head against it. The screw obviously knew nothing of my petition and did not care about the fact that I had made one. I had blindly hoped that the act of filling out a petition form would carry enough weight to see the request met. Like

children who shut their eyes and think they can't be seen, I had shut my eyes to the possibility of refusal.

All the plans that I had for filling in my time melted away and were replaced with the terrifying prospect of having to start all over again in another prison. The screw barked at me to follow her. In the corridor I found Sarah. Gloomily, she told me that she was being transferred to a place called Bullwood Hall. When we discovered we were both going, we cheered up a little.

'Well, it can't be worse than this place,' Sarah said.

I disagreed with her: I thought that it could be.

It turned out that we had to see the doctor because every inmate must be declared 'fit to travel'. I had an explosive moment when I thought I was going to fake an epileptic fit, but I talked myself out of it. After all, it would probably have resulted in a spell on the psychiatric wing, labelled as a muppet.

On our way back, Sarah and I ran into the mini-slip woman who had been so moved by singing 'The Streets of London'. When she heard that we were off to Bullwood Hall the following morning, she rolled her eyes.

'Fuckin' 'orror show, that Bullwood. I was there in '69 when it opened as a borstal. It's a slop-out. Potties and that. A real bastard place to do bird.'

Not much comfort there. If she had given it that bad a press (and she was notorious for having done the rounds of prisons all over England), it was hard to imagine what Sarah and I would make of it. The term 'slop-out' didn't enhance my mental image of the place – dirty drains and stinking potties.

In the cell, I sat on my bed, crying with anger. I was nothing more than a statistic, a number, being shunted around at random. Whether through cowardice or self-control, I contained my urge to scream obscenities through the hatch. We were leaving, or being 'shipped out', first thing in the morning, so I would not be able to say goodbye to Caroline. And what about my parents?

Had they been told of my imminent move? I knew that they had planned a visit for that Saturday, the second of the two a month I was allowed. What if they were to arrive, only to be told that I had gone somewhere else? It was an alarming upheaval.

My last night in Holloway was more depressing than my first. I was to lose all my contacts, Mrs P, Caroline, the education staff. Holloway was also much more convenient and central than Bullwood. My family and friends knew where I was, whereas they would have no idea about this place in Essex. I never imagined that when the gates of Holloway slammed shut behind me I would be sorry to leave.

2

BULLWOOD HALL

5

The journey to Hockley in Essex took an hour and a half. Sarah and I sat in the back of the van, listening to the crackly radio blaring out the Christmas Number One. Our departure from Holloway was scheduled for 9 a.m.; the van didn't arrive until 3 p.m. The screws from Bullwood Hall were flustered, blaming the delay on the officers from Holloway. The officers at Holloway had spent all day cursing the inefficiency of the Bullwood staff.

Brownie and Sophie, who were also being transferred to Bullwood, sat in the seats in front of us, listening to their personal stereos, clicking their fingers and shaking in time to the music. Sophie's attitude was no less minacious than it had been on the night of the carol service. She demanded a cigarette from Sarah, who stood her ground and refused to give her one. Sophie's face showed her hatred and contempt. 'I got friends at Bullwood, man,' was all she said.

I needed every puff of a cigarette that I could get: I was sweating with nerves. The night before, I had purged some of my anger at the transfer by ripping out the pages of my diary. I knew that if they were seen by the authorities they would be confiscated, and I would be in serious trouble. But I took a gamble on the efficiency of the prison department, and stuffed page after page into my letters. I had accumulated an enormous pile which were meant to be re-checked on my admission to the new prison. My plan was to ask for the sack of letters to be stored permanently in the prison property office, so that there would be no point in an officer going through

them. I prayed that I would not come up against a screw who did everything by the book. I had not told Sarah of my plan: there was no point in two of us worrying, and the thought of what might happen to us at Bullwood was bad enough.

I did not know what to expect from the buildings themselves. I had vague images of an old Victorian manor house, converted for prison use; something with character, haunted perhaps. Nothing prepared me for the appearance of our next place of imprisonment.

Bullwood Hall looked like a Second World War concentration camp. Beyond the high, barbed-wire fence lay a dispiriting clump of concrete buildings, erected in the Sixties. The walls were grey and dirty, as if stained by the purpose they had served over the last twenty years. Rows of tiny barred windows faced on to lugubrious views of the prison grounds: a pre-fab factory, a netball court/exercise yard, a murky green swimming pool and the enclosing fence. There was none of the hospital air of Holloway at Bullwood: it was a prison to its core.

The new arrivals shuffled into the Reception. If Holloway's appeared to be a bit disorganised, this Reception was chaos. It was small, with bits of paper everywhere, files on the desk and chair, overflowing ashtrays and general squalor. To my horror, we were ordered to sit in tiny airless cells, shaped like telephone boxes, until it was our turn to go through our property with the screw in charge. It was no better than being an animal. The cramped booths were in a row, and accommodated one prisoner at a time; they stank of stale cigarettes and body odour, and had no window, just a thick pane of glass in the upper part of the door. Every time I tried to attract a screw's attention, she walked straight past me, pretending that she had not heard my muted cries.

After two hours of claustrophobia, my door was unlocked. A screw held out a tatty dressing gown.

'Strip-search,' she snapped, then, as I slowly undressed, 'Come on love, give us a twirl.' I spun round as fast as I could. The thought of her standing there, looking at my naked body, made me retch. I couldn't see why the strip-search was necessary since every screw knew that a frisk would be enough to determine whether the inmate was concealing dangerous weapons, food, or anything else that can't be hidden in the vagina or anus, or swallowed. Many inmates complained of being humiliated during the strip-search, of officers lifting up a breast, or making personal remarks: 'Pauline, you smell disgusting. Don't you ever wash between your legs?'

With my clothes back on, I went through to the Reception, and waited until my property, or Prop., was checked. The screw on the opposite side of the table looked flustered. The dirt from her well-used ashtray spilled out on to the cards, on which were listed all my possessions. During my fortnight in Holloway a great many people had sent me books. I was allowed six in my possession at any one time, but they all had to be gone through, listed and signed for. The screw, Miss Frome, did not like the amount of work that she was faced with, and told me repeatedly what a nuisance I was.

When I made my request for my bag of letters from Holloway to be put straight into my Prop., Miss Frome took one look at the sack and shoved it straight into the property office. My diaries were safe for the time being. I had given little thought to the consequences had I been caught doing this, but the idea of ending up on the block scared me rigid, and losing remission would have upset my parents terribly.

I looked around the sordid room, and wondered why the reception procedure had to be so unpleasant. The amount of paperwork involved was enough to drive the most sanguine of screws into a frenzy. Every item of an inmate's property had to be written down, by hand,

on cards that were then filed away. Any medical files or records from the previous prison had to be handed over and filed. It was not that I expected a welcome party to celebrate our arrival, but the experience of being cramped into those tiny cells for hours without being told what was happening was frightening and, as far as I could see, unnecessary. It would have been far more humane to have let us sit together in a secure room to wait for our turn with the reception officer. If the prison department could devise a way to cut down on the bureaucracy, the screws would be able to offer a more sympathetic approach to the new arrivals; and there might also be an opportunity for an officer to explain the nature of the prison, and the way it is run, to the inmates who have never been there before. Making the admission procedure less harrowing would perhaps reduce the hostility that builds up amongst the more volatile prisoners, who think nothing of rebelling against an impersonal and humiliating system.

After an age of checking and signing, I was escorted to the hospital wing, with my clothes and six books wrapped in my dressing gown, for the obligatory session with the nurse. Sarah and the other girls were still confined to their cramped booths.

The nurse asked me routine questions about contagious diseases and my mental health; then an un-routine question on what a nice, intelligent girl like me was doing in a place like this.

'I'm not a nice girl,' I hissed. Why should I be any more or less nice than the majority of the girls she had to weigh, inspect and question? My careless and depressing introduction to Bullwood was wearing away my patience. There was a notice on the wall outside the surgery which declared, 'Shouting out windows is a reportable offence'. They were too lazy, even, to correct an obvious grammatical error.

The nurse showed me to my wing, Kestrel. I followed her through corridors which had metal-barred doors at each end. We constantly stopped to unlock, go through, and lock again.

Kestrel wing, unlike the wings at Holloway, was exactly as I had imagined prisons to be. Before me was a long, rectangular hall divided into two open storeys. There was a flight of stairs joining the floors at the door end, and on the upper level there was a balustrade, over which you could see to the floor below. On the lower level was a small kitchen, a recess with two lavatories, a washroom with baths, basin and showers, and a recreation room with a television. Along the opposite side were the cells. Upstairs there was another recess, a shower room and cells along one side, and more cells along the other. Some were doubles, some were singles, but they were all the same size.

I was taken upstairs and shown to a single. I did not know if there was any specific reason for this. The cell was much smaller than the single I had had at Holloway, about six feet by nine, with a waist-high cupboard running along the left-hand side wall and a narrow iron bed on the right. To the left of the cupboard sat the dreaded potty; to my horror I saw that it was only semi-opaque. I dreaded the thought that other inmates could see what I had 'done'. I wondered what would happen if I peed in it, then kicked it over by mistake; this was quite conceivable, since there was barely enough room to make the bed. What about the inmates sharing cells? Did they have separate potties, or were they made to share? I couldn't stop these speculations. The idea of having to squat on a potty at all made me go cold, reminding me of childhood nightmares. I kicked it hard into the corner. There was also a plastic bucket and washing-up bowl which I was to use for washing myself at night, or soaking dirty clothes.

The window had horizontal and vertical bars, through

which I could see the cheerless swimming pool and the factory, where some of the inmates worked.

Alone in my cell, I lost track of the time and began to panic. Again, as at Holloway, I was in a world where nothing was explained and I had no idea of the prison routine, what to expect or when the cell door would next be unlocked. There was no water in my bucket, so I could not wash away the smell left over from Reception and the sordid booths that we had been locked in. Here was the first lesson to be learnt: always fill the water bucket before a bang-up. Thinking that I was not to be let out again that night, I banged on the door to ask for water. I was ignored, which increased my fear. I beat my fists harder, and shouted again and again, 'I need some water . . . let me out . . . ' A key turned in the door and a screw stood there, a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth, one hand on her hip. 'Oh dear, she hasn't brushed her teeth, and it's only half-past five.' The door slammed shut again. It was a cruel way to tell someone that there was no need to worry as the cells would be opened for supper.

The bed had to be made, so I turned my attention to that. The pillowcase wouldn't fit over the rectangle of dirty solid foam that served as a pillow and I wrestled with it for ages. My two weeks at Holloway were receding into an amorphous cloud of luxury as I contemplated the conditions at Bullwood Hall. I lay on my semi-made bed and cried from exhaustion. I was hungry, but had refused to eat the congealed plate of whatever it was that had been waiting for me on the wing when I arrived. It was a futile protest, but the only one that I was capable of making.

Through the window, I could hear the familiar sound of girls relaying the prison gossip. Then I heard someone shouting:

"Ere, Rosie, Rosie Johnston, stick yer 'ead through the bars, will yer?'

The gaps between the bars were just wide enough to fit my head through, so I stuck my neck out into the freezing air. Immediately below my window, I could see two heads twisting uncomfortably to look up at my cell.

"Ere, are you the one in the papers, then?' one of them asked.

I replied that I was.

'Thought so. Just wanted to tell ya that we 'eárd yer crying, and we wanted to tell yer to cheer up. It ain't luxury mate, but we're all in the same boat.'

'Yeah, and if yer want somewhere to sit at breakfast tomorrow, there's a space at our table. This is Maggie, and I'm Trish.'

Not long after this conversation, someone knocked on my door: it was a 'runner'. During the bang-ups, one of the inmates in each house (or wing) was permitted to stay out on the wing and pass messages from cell to cell. Each cell had a button on the inside which, when pushed, released a wooden flap on the outside, thus attracting the attention of the runner, who would ask the cell's occupant what she wanted.

'I'm Carol, the runner. Here's a note for you. Are you really that one in the papers? We heard you were coming today; someone must have seen your name on the list in Reception. See you later.'

The note was from Trish and Maggie, officially welcoming me to Bullwood. I asked Carol to thank them for me.

Despite the friendliness of Trish and Maggie, I was still miserable at having been moved to such a depressing, archaic institution. The buildings were actually constructed so that the cells had no plumbing. What happened when an inmate got food poisoning, diarrhoea or cystitis? I turned to the note that Trish and Maggie had written to me. It was an off-beat introduction, but at least it helped me through the first night. Their kindness made it easier to bear. It was a reminder that I could get through the six

months, it wasn't going to last for ever and even when things became difficult, there were others there to help and support me.

That night I dozed half-heartedly until the sharp sound of an electric bell woke me. It came from somewhere in the prison grounds. Within minutes I was up and alert, although it looked as if it was still the middle of the night outside. Having no idea of the routine, I did not know what the bells signified. I sat on my bed for an hour and a half before the screws came round to unlock the doors. All that time the bells rang every few minutes.

I never found out what they were for. Some women thought that they were rung to awaken the inmates on kitchen duty, as they had to get up early to prepare breakfast; others thought that they were the aggro bells being tested. Not even the screws were clear as to their purpose – or even whether they had one. They started every day at 6.30 a.m. For the first fortnight, they nearly drove me mad. I dreaded the first long ring and the following staccato ones, and struggled unsuccessfully to get back to sleep between blasts.

When the doors were opened in the morning, I belted to the sloosh room before a queue formed to 'slop out'. In the sloosh room we dumped the contents of our potties into a large open sink, or sloosh. The stench was asphyxiating, and there was no disinfectant – just a well-worn brush with which to wipe the insides. The basins were in a row against the wall, with one open drain running beneath them.

That this mish-mash of clogged-up drains and reeking slooshes could ever have been sanctioned by the Home Office disgusted me. I wondered if the authorities knew what it was like to stand in a queue with a potty in your hand, breathing through your mouth to avoid the stench of urine.

Breakfast was wheeled on to the wing on a trolley.

We had to collect it, then find somewhere to sit. On the first morning, Sarah and I clung together with our mugs of tea and pieces of dry toast. Sarah told me that she had had to wait for hours before she was let out of her tiny booth to go through her property. She, like me, had tapped on the glass and tried to ask questions, but was ignored by any passing screws. She was in a single cell too, on the same floor as me. We were thankful to find ourselves together.

As we stood, looking around at the inmates who were to be our new 'muckers', two girls came up to us. One was big, rough and arrogant-looking. She had a flat face and fashionable spiky hair. She wore a miniskirt and a pair of high-heeled shoes, which struck me as odd, as they were against the clothes regulations. There was something about her that I did not like the look of, although I couldn't put my finger on it. Her friend was softer and prettier, with the same spiky hair and miniskirt.

'I'm Maggie,' said the larger of the two, 'and this is Trish.'

I instantly took to Trish, but I was wary of Maggie. She looked around the wing with a proprietorial air, her muscular thighs rubbing together beneath her tight skirt. They invited us to sit with them, which we did. Sarah and I said little and let Maggie do most of the talking.

'I come from a good family,' she rasped. 'Real middle class, my Mum is. I ran away when I was fourteen and went on the game. Didn't want none of their poxy attitudes.'

She was proud that she had rejected a comfortable life for a difficult and dangerous one; not that I fully believed her story.

Trish had a lively, open face, with a crazy grin. She had not had such a desirable background against which to rebel. She had been beaten up and sexually abused by her stepfather, taken into care, then run away and become

a prostitute at the age of twelve. She had two children whom she loved beyond anything, and a boyfriend who beat her regularly and was also doing time. None of this was recounted with self-pity, but in a humorous, matter-of-fact way. I admired her ability to stay cheerful and optimistic. She was very amusing, and often had me rolling around with laughter.

Maggie wasted no time in putting me in the picture. 'The first time I tried to get Trish into bed, she stank of garlic,' she said. It was her way of saying, Hands off, Trish is my bird, so don't get any funny ideas. They were notorious for being 'at it' all the time, and had been caught in many compromising situations by the screws.

Maggie leaned over to me and said, 'Got any puff?' I looked blank. 'You know, blow, gear, dope.'

'No,' I said.

'What about you?' to Sarah.

'No.'

'Any of yer visitors going to keep yer sweet?'

'No,' we replied. She looked disappointed. 'Well, me and Trish is going to be right out of our trees on Christmas Day. Come and see what we've got.'

Sarah and I followed them into the kitchen, where we scraped the remainder of our food into the slops bucket, and washed our plates, knives and forks. Maggie and Trish then beckoned us into the downstairs sloosh room. Trish knelt down and pushed the buckets that were kept under the sloosh to one side, and produced a bucket with a lid on it. 'Me and Trish made this,' Maggie confided. In the bucket was a black liquid with unidentifiable bits floating around like a polluted tide. It was a mixture of cold tea, orange squash, yeast (stolen from the kitchen), apples (saved up from supper) and rice. Maggie and Trish were excited by their disgusting potion. 'We're savin' it for Christmas. You can have some too, if you like.' I definitely didn't like.

I asked them both what they had been sent to prison

for. Trish at once launched into a story of how she was 'pissed at a night club' with her boyfriend, who became involved in an argument with a bouncer. The bouncer told him to leave, or he would be thrown out. The boyfriend refused to go, and a fight started. Trish could see that the bouncer was getting the better of her boyfriend, so she picked up a bottle of wine and smashed it over his head. Trish was charged with grievous bodily harm (GBH) and was doing eighteen months. Maggie was more reticent about her crime. She said that it was for dangerous driving, which few believed, although the card outside her cell indicated that she was doing a sentence of eighteen months. She demanded cigarettes and rollies from other inmates and organised campaigns against women whom she did not like. I presumed that Trish took comfort from her relationship with Maggie; it assured her protection. Maggie enjoyed being the dominant partner and treating Trish as 'her girl'.

That first day at Bullwood, I was very worried that my parents, who were expecting to visit me the next day, did not yet know that I had been transferred. After breakfast I accosted a screw and asked for help; I was frantic with worry that my family might go all the way to Holloway only to find that I wasn't there. She told me that I would be seeing the AG who would decide what to do.

I was taken to his office later on and explained the situation. To my amazement, he held out the telephone.

'Why don't you ring them, and tell them yourself?'

Apparently it was common practice for inmates to ring their families after a transfer. I was furious that no one had told me this before.

I dialled my home number, shaking with excitement. There was a click at the other end, and I heard my mother's voice.

'Hello?'

'Hello Mum, it's Rosie.'

'What? Oh my God . . . what are you doing? Where are you? Are you all right?'

Poor Mum, she thought I had run away.

'I'm fine,' I replied. I explained that I had been moved, and that she and Dad would have to come all the way to Essex, instead of to London. She said that she didn't care where she had to come, she would be there. We both said 'I love you,' and then I was told to ring off.

Talking to Mum was an elating experience, but it caused all my latent homesickness to come surging to the surface. I returned to my cell, crying with longing. Mum would be crying too, I knew, thinking of me in a new prison.

It was nearly Christmas, and most of the inmates spent the afternoon putting the finishing touches to the Christmas decorations. The staff had organised a competition to see which wing could produce the best decorations, with a theme. Our wing had chosen to do a mock-up of Albert Square from *EastEnders*. At the far end, there was a reconstruction of the Queen Victoria pub, with a life-size cardboard figure of the notorious Denis Watts behind the bar. To the right, a small area where the ping-pong table was usually kept had been cleared and made to look like the saloon area of the pub; there were beer mats on the tables with plastic glasses on them – gin and tonics made with prison water. Further down the wing was a fruit stall: the ping-pong table had been transformed into a market barrow, with balls of orange crêpe paper rolled up to look like tangerines.

Sarah and I roped ourselves into making paper chains. The atmosphere was jovial and the gramophone was blasting out a song that everyone knew. Sarah distinguished herself by painting a life-size Father Christmas to put up on the landing of the upper floor.

During this time, I talked to two girls, Mina and Emma,

who shared a cell on the opposite side of the landing. They were both doing time for drug offences. Emma was waiting to hear about her parole; she had been given eighteen months for dealing heroin. Mina was charged with the supply of cannabis, and was doing nine months. She was bitter, as she claimed that the amount found on her at the time of her arrest was for her own personal use, but the police had decided that there was enough to constitute a supply charge.

When the screw who was supervising went downstairs, Emma grabbed my hand. 'Come here, I want to show you something,' she whispered.

Not knowing what to expect, I followed her into her cell.

'Look at this.' She held out a green plastic mug.

I peered into it, only to see a repellent gooey mess at the bottom.

'It's medicine,' she said.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

'Every night I get my medicine, right? Well, I don't swallow it, I spit it out. This is amitriptyline, and I've saved up enough for us all to have some on Christmas Day: me, Mina and Laurie, who you haven't met yet. But you can have some too, if you want.'

I thanked her for her kind offer, and said I'd see how I felt on Christmas Day. The alternatives open to me for having a 'good time' at Christmas were both unappealing and strange. I thought about brandy butter and hot punch; spat-out medicine and prison-brewed hootch were sorry substitutes.

Before I left her cell, Emma gave me a word of warning. 'Stay away from Trish and Maggie, they're real bitches. If they're being nice to you, it's for a reason. It's not the kindness of their hearts.'

There was no association that night. After we had been banged up, a girl in a cell below me started singing:

Come to Bullwood, come to Bullwood,
It's a place of misery,
There's a signpost on the corner
Saying 'Come and visit me.'
Build a bonfire, build a bonfire,
And then cover it with shit,
Put Miss Adams in the middle,
And then set fire to it.

I stuck my head through the bars. 'Who's that singing?' I called.

'Jack,' came the reply. 'It's not my real name, but everyone calls me that. 'Ere, you're not that new bod, Rosie wotsits, are ya?'

'That's right. I haven't seen you on the wing, have I?'

'Nah, cos I'm on lock-ins fer 'avin' a sit-out.'

She explained that she and a few other girls had decided that they weren't having enough association, so they staged a 'sit-out'. This involved sitting on the netball court after exercise and refusing to budge. Her punishment was two weeks behind the door. She had to stay in her cell for twenty-four hours a day, except to collect her meals and water, and to slop out.

'Got any baccy?' she asked.

I replied that I hadn't.

'Tell yer wot, though, I could tell who you are, 'cos of your posh voice!' She laughed, and then shouted to Trish and Maggie, who said that they could spare her a roll-up.

'All right then, let's swing the shoe.'

Jack lowered a gym shoe out of the window. She had tied the laces together so that the shoe could reach the next-door cell. She started to swing it, increasing the length of the laces as she did so. Trish caught it and stuffed some tobacco into the toe. Jack then swung the shoe gently back, so that none of the precious cargo

would be lost. The ingenuity of this idea appealed to me.

I lay back on my bed staring at the words 'Corinne loves Lisa' scrawled in biro across the ceiling.

The prospect of my visit the next day, a Sunday, was at once exciting and depressing. I could hardly wait to see Mum and Dad, who were bringing a close friend with them, but I did not want them to see my grim new surroundings. They were bound to return home horrified by the differences between Bullwood and Holloway. I hated to think of my parents, Dad especially with his gruelling work schedule, visiting their daughter in a slop-out nick in an uninspiring corner of Essex. However, one advantage that Bullwood did have to offer was longer visiting hours. It was now to be an hour and a half if the visit was on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, half an hour if it was midweek, compared to the measly half an hour or forty minutes at Holloway.

In the morning, Sarah and I decided to go to the Church of England service. After breakfast, we queued by the door and had our names checked off a list. We were escorted to the education block, the largest room of which doubled up as the prison chapel. There was an altar at one end and chairs set out before it. Because of the freezing temperature there was a rush to sit next to the heaters. Two girls from different wings fondled each other in the row behind me; church provided them with a meeting place.

The chaplain delivered a rousing sermon in which he expounded God's power of healing by telling us how He had prevented the chaplain from raising two fingers at a driver who had made him swerve. The prisoners liked him, although there was the usual contingent of whisperers and gigglers.

At lunchtime, there was the inevitable jostling by the trolley, like sheep desperate to get to the trough. Less

aggressive girls were shoved to the back, while pushy girls would bag a place for their friends near the front. Maggie was the chief offender, but was never ticked off for it. Her rough over-confidence scared many of the girls; she appeared to have some of the screws to heel as well.

During dinner, Sarah and I sat quietly with Trish and Maggie, who did not stop talking. Sarah had become even more withdrawn since our arrival at Bullwood. I did not know whether introspection was just her way of coping, or whether she was building up to a breakdown. I wanted to ask her if she was all right, but she gave little encouragement. Again I wondered if it was merely her appearance and shyness that gave the impression of her being aloof. We both had visits that afternoon. Maggie pestered us with questions about who was coming. Was it a boyfriend? One of my posh friends? Anyone with drugs? She wasn't put off by our monosyllabic answers, but carried on badgering.

The hour and a half of waiting after dinner before the visit was the slowest time of all; the time that followed it went in a trice. At Bullwood there was a tannoy system, over which the names of the girls whose visitors had arrived were announced, so that everyone could hear who the lucky ones were. My name was called, my door unlocked, and I was taken to the factory, which was used as a visitors' hall at the weekends. Tables were arranged lengthways down the room in two columns: visitors on one side, prisoners on the other. All the prisoners had to be seated before the visitors could enter the hall. When the door at the far end was opened, the inmates craned their necks to see their families arriving. I saw my mother's white beret and stood up in excitement.

'Sit down at once,' snapped a screw.

Mum, Dad and a friend, Rich, came over to where I was sitting. We hugged, silently, clumsily, over the table. It was difficult to know what to say. Mum and

Dad were obviously upset by the new place. Mum immediately dubbed it Bulldyke Hall. Rich, who was based in America, had come back for Christmas. He had written to me often while I was on bail, saying how much he was looking forward to seeing me on his return. He had not expected it to be over a prison visiting table.

The cold, grey factory room did nothing to alleviate the visitors' initial horror of Bullwood, although my three did all they could to make the situation bearable. Mum gave me all the gossip from the village, while I tried to amuse them with stories of prison life. I pointed out my cell window through the dirty high windows of the factory. My father's spirits had been lowered by having to sit in a Portakabin waiting-room for visitors that he claimed was filthy, with rubbish on the floor, and ash-covered tables. At home we always teased him for his fastidious tidiness, calling him the park-keeper, and faddy daddy. He said that he would bring a dustpan and brush the next time he came. We drank cups of tea that Rich bought from the canteen. I was too hyped up to want any sweets, but chainsmoked the cigarettes that Mum had brought. I was not allowed to take any away from the visit, so smoking them became a race against time.

When the hour and a half was up, I watched them disappear through the door with a mixture of relief and misery. I didn't want them within the environs of Bullwood Hall for a moment longer than necessary; at the same time, the last thing I wanted was for them to go.

The effect that visits had was odd. Their obvious advantage was that they provided the inmates with human contact with the outside. They were also a fortnightly milestone: a way of measuring your sentence. But they were unsettling. However enjoyable a visit was, I was always left behind at the end. It was impossible for my visitors not to talk of the things they had been doing, and the projects they had planned, while I was locked in a cell, standing in a queue or peering through bars.

Sometimes I hated visits, because they reminded me too much of my cosy world outside, just as I was managing to cope with my life within. Yet the excitement before a visit broke the monotony in my daily life. Perhaps the most important aspect of visiting as far as I was concerned was that it kept my mother and father afloat. The fortnightly bulletins either seen through their own eyes, or reported by friends, made my prison sentence just about tolerable for them.

After this visit, I was deflated. Tea did not help. The vegan mince was tasteless and lumpy. Some of the girls said that they had seen Rich from their windows, recognised him as my visitor from a photograph I kept on my wall, and had shouted to him. Kestrel wing was ideally placed for 'visitor spotting'. The cells on my side of the wall looked out over the factory; all visitors had to walk along a concrete path which made them easy targets for the inmates' comments – "Ere, are you Karen's visit? Well, she said she 'ad a hunky boyfriend . . . Monkey, more like!'

Meanwhile, the girls 'waiting on a visit' were sitting in their cells hoping to hear their names called out over the tannoy. This was torture for those of them who had sent out their VOs and spent all week anticipating a visit which never came. My new friend Mina was such a casualty. Every week, she laid out her best trousers and jumper, did her face with the vast collection of make-up that she had accumulated through private spends and waited in vain for her boyfriend, Danny, to arrive. Like other women whose boyfriends or husbands failed to turn up, she made excuses for him: 'Well, I know he had to go and see a car in Hackney.' I wished that the unreliable people who had been sent a VO by an inmate could see how their behaviour affected the woman who had sent it.

Mina not only had the disappointment of her fly-by-night boyfriend to cope with, but also the ceaseless round of scornful jokes from Maggie. Mina was dark-skinned

and suffered from thick facial hair, about which Maggie frequently commented: 'Oh look, the werewolf has got her glad rags on for the invisible man . . . ' Mina took these comments to heart and it was left to her friends Emma and Laurie to defend her. Maggie did not like me being friends with Mina, and taunted Mina whom she accused of 'sucking up to the new bods'. It was an example of how mean Maggie could be.

6

On Christmas Eve, I had a visit from my barrister, my solicitor and his wife. They had filed for an appeal as soon as I had been taken away to prison, and this was the pretext on which they were coming to see me. They really came to cheer me up and bring me some comfort. I was very touched that they had taken the trouble to struggle all the way to Essex on the night before Christmas. I smoked all their cigarettes and listened as they outlined the case for the appeal. The thought that I might, just possibly, be released early caused me to return to my cell on a wave of euphoria. Having this straw to cling to brightened my Christmas Eve considerably. Thinking ahead to the appeal, I was confident that I would be allowed out and that the prison nightmare would be over within a couple of months.

My buoyant mood was not to last for long. A carol service had been arranged in the gym on Christmas Eve and I went along with Sarah, ready to dive into the Christmas mood. I should have learnt my lesson from the one I went to at Holloway.

A Salvation Army band had volunteered to play carols for us. They stood on the stage at the far end of the gym, puffing into trombones and clarinets.

'Let's all get the Christmas spirit,' the bandleader urged.

'Mine's a gin and tonic,' shouted a woman from behind me. There was derisory laughter, as the bandleader tried uncomfortably to regain our attention.

A short, fat girl went to the lectern to read a lesson

from the Bible. She read slowly, and faltered several times. Women from the back rows started booing. The girl carried on reading, looking less sure of herself with each sentence. The screws made little effort to curb the heckling, unkind and tormenting though it was. At the end of the lesson, the girl fled back to her seat, ashamed at her poor performance. I was saddened by the other inmates' behaviour. Why had they not tried to give the girl some encouragement? At the same time, I knew that many of the women had not had a Christmas 'on the out' for a few years. No wonder they didn't feel like behaving.

After the service, I returned to Kestrel wing engulfed in a fog of homesickness. Singing carols reminded me of midnight mass in our tiny village church and walking home afterwards to mince pies and stockings. At school, we were always reminded of the real reason for Christmas and that it wasn't just an excuse to pester our parents for a new bicycle. None of us paid much attention then, as we giggled amongst the pews, and after I left school, it was easy to think that the Christmas spirit was best found during an endless round of December parties: a good excuse to open a bottle, shout jovially about wise men and sheep, then plant a drunken kiss on the cheek of the person standing next to you. None of that was happening for the inmates of Bullwood Hall. It was difficult not to compare situations: while my friends and family, many of whom would have an open fire to stand in front of, raised glasses sparkling with champagne, sherry or mulled wine, in Bullwood there were girls who came in every year to escape the loneliness of being homeless on the outside. For other women, the majority of whom longed to be at home, the separation from their families was acutely painful. Every television advertisement – toys for children, presents for husbands – emphasised family togetherness. Many women cried continually thinking of their children wondering where

Mummy was on Christmas Day. For them, it was a time of desolation, not cheer and goodwill. I was sure that I would never be able to think about Christmas in the same way again.

Back on the wing, Sarah and I went to sit in Emma and Mina's cell before we were banged up. Emma, like many of the girls on Kestrel wing, had a young daughter whom she was missing terribly. Her common-law husband was looking after the baby and he sent photographs regularly.

Emma had a guitar in her cell, as she was doing a course of guitar lessons, and she agreed to let me borrow it for a while. Sitting on my bed, strumming quietly to myself, I looked at my arrangement of Christmas cards, stuck to my pinboard. There were hundreds of messages of goodwill, although some people had been embarrassed about what to put. 'It doesn't sound right to say "Happy Christmas" but Jack and I hope it will be as good as it can be under the circumstances . . . we pray that 1987 will be a better year for you.' I prayed for the same thing.

The sound of the guitar attracted attention. Heads started to poke through the bars and shout for requests. Trish wanted 'The House of the Rising Sun', which she made me play twice. Jack-who-swung-the-shoe wanted Simon and Garfunkel. None of us could see each other, but the singing became more and more enthusiastic and went on for hours. Further down the wing, someone banged their plate on the pipes. 'Ask her if she knows "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean".' My voice and fingers were raw, but I thanked the far-sighted power who had prevented me from giving up playing the guitar when I had threatened to.

At midnight, by which time I was becoming too tired to carry on, every inmate from every wing started to bang their plates, knives and forks on the pipes. Cries of 'Have a blinding Christmas, mate,' rang out through the bars. We all cheered, and sang Jack's version of 'While

Shepherds Wash their Cocks by Night'. I heard Sarah shouting 'Happy Christmas' to me from her cell down the corridor. I leant out of the window, shouted back and then retreated from the freezing night.

Three days before Christmas, our Wing Chief had announced that we were being donated £1.50 each by a local charity, to spend at the canteen. With our wages and a Christmas bonus from the prison as well, we were rich. Each wing had taken it in turns to go to the canteen and choose its Christmas parcels, which would then be kept and given out on Christmas Day. Standing in front of the myriad luxuries behind the canteen counter, I grappled with decisions: whether to have a Topic or a Mars bar, how many extra stamps to buy for letters and what proportion of my wealth to spend on tobacco. It was like winning the pools. I saw my supplies fill a brown bag, ready for an orgy of smoking and eating.

Christmas morning, like every other morning, started with the 6.30 a.m. bells. The doors opened at 7.45 a.m. Hanging from the handle of my cell door was the pillowcase we had been told to put out the night before, filled with ten cigarettes, bubble bath, a heart-shaped sponge, shampoo, a packet of soup and some sweets. These were our presents from the prison. Standing in the slop-out queue, I noticed that the screws were not wearing uniform; some of them had on pretty, colourful clothes; others, although in mufti, looked much the same as they usually did. All still had large bunches of keys hanging from their waists. There was a spill of excitement in the air as girls compared the contents of their pillowcases.

'Cor, apple shampoo, that's reem, mate. I'll give you a couple of straights for it.'

'Don't need 'em with this lot, do I? Sorry mate, nothing doing.' Christmas and the New Year were rotten times for tobacco traders.

Apart from the Christmas dinner, there was one other

event that had been much discussed: the half-hour inter-wing association for which the Governor had given permission. Normally, inmates were not allowed on to other wings unless their work took them there; for instance, if they were delivering laundry, when we were usually banged up anyway. But today we would be allowed to walk freely around the prison, looking at the other wings' decorations. This was also an opportunity for girls with lovers on other wings to meet without complication. Usually they had to pass illicit letters through kitchen workers or the prison cleaners, arranging a meeting during gym. After breakfast there was a flurry of clothes-swapping and make-up-borrowing; everyone wanted to look their best.

First on the agenda was the Christmas service in the chapel. The chaplain was faced with the onerous task of trying to offer cheer to a group of disconsolate prisoners. His words were inevitable: 'Don't be downcast, the Lord has not forsaken you. He will alleviate your suffering in His own time, His own way.' Well intentioned as it was, his message could do little to raise our spirits. Women with children sobbed openly as we sang the carols.

Dinner was early, at 11 a.m. instead of 11.30 a.m. All the square café-like tables had been rearranged to form one long trestle table which was covered in green crêpe paper. There were crackers (we were even allowed to keep the explosive strip in the middle) and colourful napkins. Turkey was served, although Sarah and I had peanut roast (Sarah had also registered as a vegan when she arrived at Bullwood), and we had a mountain of vegetables, crisps, and Christmas pudding. An eruption of cracker-pulling followed, paper hats were put on and jokes were read out: for five minutes there was a medley of "Ere, Jack, waddya get if yer cross . . . ' followed by shouts of laughter, and 'Crap joke . . . listen to this one!'

The screws participated in all the action, wearing silly

hats and pulling crackers with the girls. Everyone was doing their best to make the day a success. There was as much to eat as we could manage. After dinner, we waddled back to our cells for a brief bang-up before the inter-wing wander.

Some of the girls had no one to send them cards or flowers. Others withdrew from the occasion. There was one girl on our wing, Julie, who never mixed with anyone else. She always ate alone in her cell, never stopping to talk except when it was necessary. She had been given six years for murder, reputedly her second one, but her withdrawn, taciturn nature made it impossible to talk to her. The prison festivities passed her by; she wasn't interested.

When we were let out again for the inter-wing association, it was like the start of the London Marathon. All the inmates tore from house to house, revelling in being allowed to walk through doors without having to wait for someone to unlock them and falling upon their friends rapturously. Sarah and I stood back and watched: no one fell on us as we did not have friends spread through the prison as many other women did – acquaintances from Holloway, or from a previous sentence. We looked at the decorations, then returned to Kestrel. Our wing proved to be the most popular and women came from every house to join in the festivities. The gramophone was turned up full blast, and the girls began to dance, crowding by the mock-up bar. Sarah and I sat, stunned, watching the women create their own pub atmosphere. Swigging back the fake gin and tonics, they began to lurch about, giggling, and bobbing to the music.

Sarah nudged me. 'Can you smell what I can smell?' she whispered.

I could. It was cannabis. Two inmates were blatantly smoking a joint, while someone else was rolling up a huge reefer on a table near by. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Governor, doing her rounds of the

wings and inspecting the decorations. Usually we had to stand up when she entered the room – not doing so was a reportable offence – but on this occasion, no one bothered.

She stood there, by our prison-made bar, chatting to the girls who had constructed it, while dope was being smoked virtually under her nose. I was sweating with fear. Surely we would all be done for it? I sat back and waited for the inevitable to happen, trapped by dancing girls, not wanting to move in case I drew attention to what was going on. But the Governor did not appear to notice the smell of marijuana, and was soon walking towards the door. Meanwhile, Trish and Maggie had locked themselves in a downstairs loo in order to drink their disgusting concoction. I steered clear of them.

We won the prize for the best wing decorations; Kestrel had also been the nucleus of the inter-wing excitement. The Kestrel women were proud of themselves and were euphoric at the end of the day.

The outside world was a million miles away, separated from us by bricks and steel. The things that mattered were the choice of video to watch that evening, how best to share out the prize that we had won for the decorations, and the knowledge that our next few bang-ups would be more bearable because of the good stock of supplies that we had all accumulated. We watched the video in the cramped television room, and then we were treated to another banquet, a sort of amalgamation of tea and supper.

When the celebrations were over, it was back to the prosaic solitude of my cell. Some girls had decorated theirs with paper chains, but I had only my cards and a bunch of past-it flowers to liven up the monotonous grey brick walls, lit by the yellow bulb of the strip light. Overall, I thought, the day had been a success. If you are trapped and powerless to alter your situation, the only thing to do is to make the most of it. The screws

tried hard; everyone tried hard. But no amount of effort could eliminate the nagging sadness behind the paper-hat smiles. 'How are the kids? Mum said she'd managed a stocking. I hope Gary didn't get too pissed and spoil it for them. I'll make it really special next year . . . ' I knew that my parents would be thinking of me.

I jumped off my bed and threw my paper hat out of the window. It floated away into the crisp darkness. It was a 'lonely impulse of delight', a farewell to a Christmas which had been both joyous and depressing, alien and comforting.

Sleeping was a problem, so I decided to do something about it. During the week between Christmas and the New Year, I went to the doctor to ask for some medicine. I explained my history of sleeping problems to the Chief Medical Officer, who questioned me closely. I was impressed with the trouble he took, until I realised that he was not taking an interest in my case for its individual complexity, but merely taking precautions against prescribing tranquillisers to another bored inmate. Abuse of medicine was a problem, but so was the inmates' genuine need for it. The medical authorities might have thought that most of us wanted to alter our consciousness, but sleep didn't strike me as such a depraved form of escape. The more it eluded me, the worse my ability to relax became. I craved at least a week's dreamless sleep. The doctor prescribed a medicine I had never heard of, then jotted it down in my medical file.

Every night, before supper, the nurse did her rounds of the wings with a tray of medicine for those who had been prescribed it. The medicine was always dished out in liquid form to prevent the inmates from concealing pills in their mouths – a measure against potential overdoses. They thought that they'd thought of everything, but by holding the medicine in their mouths, Emma and numerous other inmates had found a way of beating the system.

The medicine was measured into small plastic containers which had the name of the relevant inmate written in felt pen on the side. Temazepam, a sleeping draught, was emerald green; amitriptyline, an antidepressant, was a clear, greyish colour. The stuff that looked like liquid tar was Largactil, a strong tranquilliser for inmates prone to violence or 'over-excitability'. The medicine handed to me was an offensive pink; I slugged it back, returned to my cell and waited for sleep to descend. It didn't.

The next morning I asked Emma what the pink stuff was.

'You've been fobbed off, like everyone else who asks for sleeping medicine,' she said. 'They give you that to see if you're trying it on or not.'

I was furious and stormed back to the doctor the next day. He put me on a daily dose of 5 ml of temazepam.

On New Year's Eve, I heard a conversation outside my cell window between Trish, Maggie and Marjorie, who was a friend of Emma's. Marjorie was standing on the concrete path below, wearing thick rubber gloves and holding a large broom. It was her turn to 'shit-shovel'. At night, 'shit parcels' were thrown out of the windows, along with used sanitary towels, urine from potties and regurgitated food. The occupants of the cells that faced out on to the path had to take it in turns to clear it up.

Now, as Marjorie took her turn at shit-shovelling, she was using the opportunity to chat up Trish. Both Maggie and Trish were giggling flirtatiously and 'slagging off' Emma with Marjorie, who referred to her as 'That lying cow who looks like a witch, who has that stupid friend covered in hair . . . '

'The werewolf!' shouted Trish and Maggie, meaning Mina. They well knew that anyone with a cell that faced out on to the path would be able to hear them, if their window was open – as mine was. Maggie didn't like me being friendly with Emma and Mina, and made it plain

that she would rather that I was in her camp. I had a hunch that my refusal to become one of Maggie's 'followers' would result in her turning nasty. I don't know if she intended me to overhear, but I couldn't help it.

The conversation became more raucous and rude, and Emma was being ripped apart, although Emma thought that Marjorie was a friend of hers. Sneaky though it sounds now, I told Emma, whom I liked, what I had heard when I next saw her on association.

'Just because I couldn't find my gear,' she said. Not for the first time, drugs had caused the tension. On her last visit, Emma had been passed some dope (or 'left sweet') which she had swallowed and promised to give to Marjorie. But the dope refused to reappear, even after she had swallowed shampoo to try to sick it up.

This was the first inkling I had of Maggie's petty troublemaking. Squabbles like these, which I always got involved in, began to colour daily prison life.

As it was New Year's Eve, there was still a festival air in the prison. I thought back to the year before, when I had been in Scotland with friends, enjoying long walks in the bracken, a day's shooting, orange gin, reels and first footing. Later, we'd headed back to London on the Glasgow train, drinking beer and playing cards with strangers, arriving back in time to meet friends in a pub in Fulham. The Christmas holidays were always the most exciting, with everyone in London, snug in houses safe from the cold, or out looking for a party. There was always a crowd of us; I was never alone. It was all a far cry from a plastic potty, wilting flowers and a preoccupation with the tobacco supply.

Five minutes before midnight, Jack clanked on the pipes to warn us of the approaching New Year. We all went to our windows with our plates and forks, ready to see it in. At midnight, the banging started. 'Happy New Year!' The prison reverberated with every wing singing 'Auld Lang Syne'. Maggie squirted talc through her bars;

others did the same. A cloud of powder, obscuring the glare of the prison neon lights, floated past the heads poking through the bars. The rumpus went on for several minutes, but it was freezing outside, so we soon pulled ourselves back in. I lay down, relieved to be shot of 1986. Things could only get better.

The week after New Year, I became bored and inert. The hot water went off and we had to fill our buckets with cold water, which spurted out of the taps at freezing point. There were loud complaints – 'Talk about brass bleedin' monkeys.' To help take our minds off this added hardship, the screws had set us a quiz. A prize was offered for the winner. Trish was given an extra prize for having the wittiest answers.

Question: What county breeds the most pigs?
Trish's answer: Bethnal Green police station.

My frantic scribbling dwindled; instead I lay around during the bang-ups, hating my surroundings, waiting for the appeal and listening to the endless conversations between inmates, which were like a serial on the wireless. I gradually untangled a new stage in the love life of Maggie and Trish. They had split up so that Maggie could indulge her fancy for a woman on another wing. They were still sharing a cell, but Maggie was trying to fix Trish up with someone else, so that she wouldn't have to feel guilty about finishing their affair.

Sarah had also filed for an appeal, and was thinking about the possibilities of an early release. Whenever we saw each other we promised ourselves that we would not dwell on the subject. Building up our hopes would only end in disappointment: it was best to protect ourselves by expecting nothing.

As the wing became dreary and cheerless with the removal of the decorations, so did its inmates. Many

of the girls on Kestrel wing were nearing the end of their sentences and a large shipment from Holloway brought a number of unwelcome faces – the girl who had propositioned me, another woman who had sneered at me from time to time. The atmosphere descended into one of weary sullenness. With Christmas over, there was nothing to look forward to but days of useless routine.

7

Breakfast at 8 a.m. was not a strict regime, although it varied depending on which screw was on duty. If a popular screw wheeled the trolley on to the wing, the inmates would shuffle to the queue in their pyjamas, collect what was on offer and then go back to bed. Cries of 'Who'll swop their marge for my cornflakes,' or 'Anyone want my toast for a roll-up?' dominated every breakfast-time. If it was a stricter screw on duty, we would not be allowed to collect our food until we were fully dressed.

As vegans, Sarah and I were each given a box of supplies on a Friday which were supposed to last us all week. These included kosher margarine, muesli, soya milk, peanut butter, brown sugar and unprepared tea and coffee. Neither of us could make our supplies last, either because we indulged in an orgy of peanut-butter sandwiches, or because we traded soya milk and muesli for roll-ups.

After breakfast, we were banged up until work duty. Not every inmate at Bullwood worked, as there weren't enough jobs for each of the two-hundred-plus women. For the first three weeks I was not allocated to a job, so would spend the mornings in my cell. Those inmates who had been given jobs were escorted from their cells at 9.30 a.m. Some of them worked in the factory, sewing gym shorts for male prisoners or making cardboard boxes under contract for a pizza company. The building was cold and the monotony of the work made it unpopular, although it was a chance to meet up with women from

other wings and catch up on the happenings when the screws were out of earshot. Others worked in the laundry, or as prison cleaners, scrubbing endless floors and stairs; the Governor's orderly made cups of tea for the prison officials and kept the Governor's kitchen spotless. A few of the women, such as those who were education orderlies or worked in the prison library, enjoyed what they did. The painting party, which Jack was on, was a sought-after job; they did all the painting and decorating around the prison, inside and out. There were about five posts, which went as soon as there was a space. The hardest workers were the kitchen girls, who earned the most money. If you really hated the job you were allotted, you could apply for a job change.

There were also education courses, like typing, which many women wanted to do. The places were limited and the tuition sketchy, but it was better than being banged up all day.

Allotting us jobs was beneficial both for the staff and for the prisoners. Most importantly for us, working provided an opportunity to increase the amount of money we could spend each week at canteen. It also meant escaping the tedium of long bang-ups, and the build-up of aggression that often accompanied them. For the people in authority, the prisoners' labour output meant cheaper internal running costs, and less tension in the prison.

Those not at work were usually allowed out for an hour's association before lunch (known as dinner), which was at 11.30 a.m. At 1.30 p.m. the screw on duty would shout, 'Flaps down for exercise!' and the wing would resound with the staccato clicks of shutters being released by inmates who wanted to go out. The half an hour spent shuffling around the netball court was not real exercise, but it was a chance to get some fresh air. Sarah and I would walk together, not saying much. The other women huddled close to their girlfriends, taking drags of

their rollies, shouting abuse at an unpopular inmate when she walked past.

At 2.00 p.m., the names of the different wings would be called out, and their occupants would gather at the door to be frisked and then return to their cells. Those with jobs went back to them, and those without stayed in their cells until the next association at 3.30 p.m. Tea and the second post were at 4.20 p.m.

All the association hours were dependent on the availability of staff, and were often cancelled or shortened. At tea, the question of the evening association was invariably brought up. 'Are we out tonight?' If the answer was yes, it meant two hours between 6 and 8 p.m. during which we could watch television, listen to the gramophone, or just sit on the wing talking. Our cell doors were locked during this time, as there had been many complaints of stealing when they had been left open.

If there was no evening association, we would be locked in at 5 p.m., with our water buckets full. Five minutes before we were due to be locked in, the screws shouted a warning, so that we knew how long we would have to collect the things we needed. After five minutes, they started locking the doors. If the occupant of a cell failed to make it back in time, she would be locked out. 'Locking out' was just a way of saying 'late', as, in fact, the cell door was reopened to admit the prisoner after a ticking-off. I was locked out on a couple of occasions, and made it by the skin of my teeth on countless more. If this happened three times, it was officially a reportable offence, which would end up with a visit to the punishment cells. It depended on the screw; it was more likely that the inmate would have ten minutes or a quarter of an hour lopped off their association time.

We would be allowed out for ten minutes or so at suppertime, which was 7.30 p.m., but sometimes our supper was given to us in our cells and we were not

allowed out at all. At 7.30 p.m., we were ready for bed. At home, the table would have been laid for dinner, my friends would be off to the pub or a cinema; in Bullwood we had twelve hours before the next turn of the key.

The hours spent alone in my single cell made me reflect and think a great deal, mostly about myself: what sort of person I was, what I was really like.

I found it impossible not to dwell on the events that happened before my arrest, with sad resignation; and I often thought about my parents. As a family, we all knew that nothing could be the same again after my arrest, and for that I took full responsibility; I wondered if they would ever be able to recover. I also wondered about my future: about what would happen to me when I came out. I lay in a vacuum, planning the impossible: how to restructure the legal system, feed the starving, save the environment, persuade East and West to disarm.

But as well as sitting and thinking, and writing my diary, I also set aside a certain amount of time for reading. On my own, I found it easier to discipline myself. I wrote down ideas that interested me and made a point of looking up any words that I did not understand. Every week I swapped the books I had in my possession for ones that were stored in my Prop. My choice was broad: I devoured Flaubert, Balzac, Homer, Lowry, van der Post, Doris Lessing, Robertson Davies and numerous others. I also became interested in Jungian psychology, particularly in relation to dreams. Reading was a way to escape the four walls of my cell during the bang-ups; a way of giving some constructive purpose to the time that I spent alone.

I was told that Bullwood Hall used to be the most notorious borstal in England. The inmates had been renowned for their violent behaviour, and the screws for their uncompromising methods of dealing with them. Bullwood's reputation had improved since its borstal

days, but it was still susceptible to outbreaks of tension and violence. Stacey, my friend from Holloway who had been in Bullwood, had 'mashed up' a screw's face on one occasion. There were also a considerable number of girls who took out their aggression on themselves, bashing their heads against walls or slashing themselves with glass or bits of metal torn from the beds. A disturbing percentage of these women had no past record of violence.

When I arrived at Bullwood, borstals had been abolished for three and a half years, in favour of the system of youth custody (YC). The old system for juvenile offenders was known as a 'period of training' during which the 'trainee' would have to work for her release. When a young offender was sentenced to borstal, their sentence was of an undetermined length: a minimum of six months and a maximum of two years. The hard-working, well-behaved trainees were released after they had served the minimum amount of time; the violent, uncontrolled girls ended up serving the maximum. One advantage of the borstal system was that working for release gave some, however little, purpose to a custodial sentence. But inevitably there were girls who tried hard who would sometimes be overlooked; and there were other girls who, having behaved impeccably throughout their 'training', suddenly ran amok as their release date approached, because they did not want to face the outside world.

It had struck me how young the inmates of Kestrel wing were. This was because Kestrel was predominantly a youth custody wing, which meant that the majority of the girls were under twenty-one years old. There were some as young as sixteen or seventeen, whereas I was the ripe age of twenty-three. Being in youth custody was virtually the same as being a fully fledged prisoner, except that the girls were entitled to more 'home leave' than their older counterparts. This is a period of four

days' leave granted to YCs who have a sentence of nine months or more, and to older women in open prisons with sentences of at least eighteen months; the prisoner is allowed home prior to release, in order to prepare for the outside world. The YCs had compulsory sessions in the gym and the privilege of two regulation prison letters a week.

Emma had told me that the YC wings were gradually being integrated with the older women's wings, although she didn't know whether this was for convenience or as a result of a new policy. I learnt that a key factor in the original decision to change from the borstal system to that of youth custody and to incorporate YC wings in women's prisons had been the idea that YCs would benefit from having older women around. Plausible as this theory sounds, the realities, as I discovered, were different; the change might have been a money-saving measure (since it saved running two separate types of prison), but was not a wholly effective prison reform. Being on a YC wing made a noticeable difference to Sarah and me, since the girls, being younger, were generally more noisy, less cynical, and more friendly. However, many of the older women found it disturbing and difficult to be constantly thrown together with volatile young girls. Many of them were not in a position to be a restraining influence on a young offender, nor did they wish to assume this kind of responsibility. In some cases, maternal instincts led them to try to help, only to find that the young and defensive offender did not want anyone interfering.

A double cell was due to be vacated on the lower floor. Sarah and I put in a Governor's App. to see if we could move from our singles and share. Our request was approved and we moved into Cell Six. We tossed a coin for the top bunk, which I won, and then set about making our shoebox habitable. We had

both accumulated piles of books and letters, which it had been difficult enough to cram into our single cells. Sharing was chaotic from day one.

Leaving the doleful confines of my single was like an injection of new life. Neither of us had thought twice about sharing with the other. We were sure that we got on, and knew that we were in the same boat and had to make a success of it. Even so, we had little idea of what the other was really like. I still didn't know a great deal about Sarah. She was reserved with the other prisoners, whereas I tended to talk for hours. Sarah often pointed out that I should be more careful, less ready to like everyone; she had more self-control than I did.

To begin with, I did most of the talking, telling her about my parents and sisters, thinking of funny stories to keep us amused. Sarah was reticent, only occasionally letting slip something about her past. Her career as a model had taken off when she was fifteen, leaving her with no interest in school. Faced with the choice of having dinner with a pop star or reading a book, she dropped the idea of O levels and headed for the bright lights. Her tender age and striking good looks made her a darling of the fast-living glamorous world. She took up with a man in his forties, started to take drugs and was spiralling towards disaster before she knew it. She spent years trying to come off heroin: she ran away from rehabilitation homes, ruined her career and self-respect. Now, her resolve to stay away from it was fierce.

She regretted leaving school so young. She thought that just because I had done A levels and had been to university, I must be clever. I put her right on that point. My university work was frantic and last-minute; I never read as much about the subject I was studying as I should have. We made a pact to read as much as we could. Before we moved in to the double cell, I had regarded Sarah as a comforting presence; a friend, but more through circumstances than choice. Now I saw

in her something which hadn't been evident before: a determination to make use of her time inside, and not to let the futility of being a Home Office number get the better of her. We both found that having someone else to talk to gave purpose to the never-ending bang-ups. We tried to establish a routine together: two hours each day of reading, taking notes on what we had read and writing our diaries. We also discovered that we both had a passion for backgammon and gin rummy (we were allowed cards and a backgammon set). We became absorbed in our 'Bullwood championship', sometimes finding ourselves playing before breakfast.

It was possible for inmates to order their own newspapers from the local newsagents, provided that they were paid for by friends or relatives on the outside. When I discovered this, Mum arranged for me to have the *Independent* and the *Spectator*. Sarah and I became addicted to Jeffrey Bernard's column, 'Low Life', and every Friday we would skip the serious articles on politics to find out what had been happening in the Coach and Horses. Reading the papers became a vital part of our daily curriculum; removed as we were from the outside world, we did our best to keep up with it.

One evening, Sarah decided to plait my hair. I sat on the chair, my hair wet after a dip in the bucket and a towel round my shoulders. It took Sarah several hours to cover my head with tiny, shiny plaits. She tied the ends with bits of coloured wool that Mina had given her – the leftovers from her knitting. While she worked we became absorbed in a game. We adopted different characters: Sarah was the owner of a hairdressing salon, an outrageous single woman; I was a timid customer who was disillusioned with married life, wanting a change of image, but unsure of how to go about it. Sarah advised me on a new hairstyle to 'add a bit of colour to my life'. I was pleased with the result, but nervous about what my husband would say.

We were totally caught up in our acting. For the whole evening we were in the Mile End Road, discussing the merits of going to singles bars. The biggest worry was my husband, Barry, and how I would get away for the evening; he was not the sort of man you could reason with. When it was time for me to go home, we shed our fantasy characters. We sat there, deflated and silent; at a loss to know what to say, feeling awkward as our real selves – until we saw the funny side and laughed. Incidents like this brought us closer; gradually Sarah's reserve was breaking down.

A couple of days after moving in, Sarah and I were lying on our bunks, discussing what we would do when we were released. She was still hooked on the man she had met when she was fifteen, with whom she had lived on and off ever since. He was in prison himself for being involved in a drugs case. He was due to be released before Sarah, after serving nearly two years. She knew that she wanted to see him again, but didn't know if she should. I advised her against it; he was obviously a disturbing influence on her, even if he had reformed his ways, as she claimed he had. As we talked about the pros and cons of her meeting up with him, our cell door was unlocked and a screw stood in the doorway in a heavy overcoat.

'Right. Do you want the good news first, or the bad news?' she asked.

Sarah and I both froze. Were we in trouble? If so, why? Neither of us responded.

'Well, the good news is that you're going for a walk. The bad news is that you're shit-shovelling.'

I thought about refusing, but there was no point. I would only have been given what was known as a Direct Order, and refusing to obey meant going down the block.

We followed her to a shed in the grounds where

we were fitted out with hefty black rubber gloves and industrial-looking shovels. The concrete path below Kestrel was littered with seeping bags of shit and used STs wrapped in disintegrating newspaper. I began to sweep the filth into a pile. Sarah used the shovel to scoop it into a black plastic sack. The screw looked cheerful, and carried on chattering as if there was nothing unpleasant about our task. The poor thing was probably used to it. Once we had gathered it, we dragged the bag of decomposing crap over to the prison incinerator. The screw, Miss Davies, heaved open the iron door, and waves of dense smoke poured out, the acrid smell making our eyes water. We tipped the bag in and hastily stood back.

'What makes people throw their shit out of the window?' I asked Miss Davies.

'Oh I don't know, dear,' she replied jovially. 'Perhaps they don't like the smell of it, or something.'

Maggie was leaning out of her window.

'Been shovelling the shit, then? 'Ow does it feel to be like us, scoopin' crap wiv yer fair 'ands?'

I ignored her.

Inmates who were thought to be 'shit slingers' were bullied and teased. A girl who had a cell on the wing below us had been seen throwing her ST out of the window by Maggie. Maggie had screamed her discovery across to the other wings, and the prison rang with shouts of 'Fuckin' whore, we're gonna grind yer face in the shit . . . ' This girl had written a note to Maggie which Maggie threw out of her window on to the corridor. I picked it up.

She was black, and suffered from racial harassment from Maggie as well.

You better stay off my back – I don't want to lose time because of you. I suss you out; just coz I am going home soon. Your just pickin on me and no one else. If you must no, governor, I always clean. You got a cheek saying that

to me. I was OK until you said that to me about my hair. I seen doctors in the past, they say I am not mental and they say I don't need treatment and they say I'm not insane. And they say I don't need to go to hospital. I got a lot of problems without you making it worse. Roll on 24.4.87, I be happy then. Stop upsetting me and making me cry.

From Zina.

It was not only the shit parcels which caused suspicion, but the behaviour of some unidentified inmates on the wing. Each wing had inmates appointed as cleaners, which they did as a paid job. On Kestrel, ours were Trish and Maggie. They complained incessantly about the state of the showers, lavatories and bathrooms, and of used STs being crammed into the open drains. After weeks of having to clean up this kind of muck, their disgust at their findings became intolerable, erupting in a particularly unpleasant incident. They decided to confront the entire wing with the problem.

One dinnertime, as we sat down to eat our warm spaghetti and mushy peas, Trish emptied a bucket on to the floor.

'This is what we found when we were cleaning today,' she shouted, pointing at the grotesque mess. 'Someone on this wing is fuckin' sick, I tell you, mental. This ST was left in the bathroom drain, and whoever put it there has got a filthy disease cos that ain't period blood; it's fuckin' VD or worse . . . and whoever's shittin' in the shower should be locked in a bloody kennel – someone on this wing is a filthy stinking dog who doesn't even deserve to eat crap . . . '

The wing was silent, no one looked at anyone else. We were all horrified by what Trish had emptied out of the bucket. Someone retched. Sarah and I were sitting close to the rotting pile of human filth, but we couldn't look at it; no one moved.

After an age of silence, the wing began to show signs

of life. Inmates sidestepped the stinking mound to scrape their uneaten food into the slops bucket. I could not bear the presence of that mess a moment longer, so, with Sarah's help, I swept it into a dustpan, and then emptied it into a black plastic sack. No one spoke to me as I did it. Perhaps they thought that my action indicated guilt, but it had to be got rid of.

Incidents like this made tension on the wing acute. Girls huddled together, quick to fabricate accusations, to prevent a finger from being pointed at them.

During the time that Sarah and I were settling in to our double cell, Maggie was becoming more unpleasant to me. She had learnt that I had told Emma about the conversation I had overheard between her and Marjorie, which placed me firmly amongst enemy ranks. Although she wasn't blatantly nasty to either of us, she betrayed her thoughts with glowering looks. I further blotted my copybook with Maggie one night after we were banged up, when Maggie and Trish started to shout through the bars at Jack.

'I 'eard' – long pause – 'right, that *you*' – long pause – 'right, 'ave got such a fat arse that they 'ad to widen the doors of the nick to let ya in!' This was a standard opening gambit for inmates to insult each other, known as 'coating'. Trish and Maggie went on for hours, each 'coat' becoming more obscene. Eventually the noise began to drive me mad; I shouted at them to stop. Their next couple of insults were marginally quieter, but they soon built back up to screaming level. The screw on night duty didn't try to stop them.

'Will you bloody well shut up,' I yelled again.

''Ark at 'er, lady muck. This ain't the bleedin' 'ilton, you know.'

I expected that, as Maggie was incapable of thinking up anything more original. They carried on. I pressed

the button that released the flap on the outside of the cell. The screw came waddling over.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'but you're obviously deaf. Could you tell those two in the end cell to shut their mouths, from me?' The noise stopped, but I knew that Maggie would not let that one pass.

I avoided her until dinnertime the next day, when our meeting was inevitable. I collected my vegan pizza and Manchester tart (known as Man slag), and walked nonchalantly to our table.

Maggie wasted no time. 'You could have landed us in the block 'cos of what yer did last night.' Her voice was loud, so that everyone else could hear.

'Well, you're not down the block and we managed to get some sleep,' I replied cheerfully.

She went on about Bullwood not being a posh hotel, saying that I was stupid to think that I could have everything my own way. Trish and Sarah remained silent; I didn't say much. At the first opportunity, I collected my letters and newspapers, and returned to the cell.

I was still receiving many letters, a number from male prisoners. It was as if they wanted someone to listen to their problems. Many of them poured out their life histories and their hopes for the future. One letter came from a man called Johnny, convicted of a gangland murder, serving life in Barlinnie prison.

Just think, Rosie, you are in the same position as me. OK, I'm what they term a killer, even though I killed no one. It's the law, I enter into the dark world of prison. I'm under heavy escort you know, the maniac bit. I'm thrown into a dungeon, a filthy hole, with a bare mattress on the floor, a dim light, a winters night locked into a freezing cell, my first taste of prison. I'm taken in front of the Governor in Barlinnie – 'You son, will do exactly as you're told, don't mess us about or you'll be in serious trouble'

I flipped that the man had no respect for my feelings. I didn't ask to be put in prison, I don't want all the garbage. Up here

in Scotland, it's heavy duty, down south, guys do their time. Scots prisons tend to explode at every turn . . .

Six years I've been inside, take away the time I've done in solitary, I've done about eighteen months. I've come through all the troubles, months of dirty protests, the last bit of trouble was the November siege . . .

Rosie, one day you will walk out of there with dignity and sanity.

Stay cool,

So long,

Johnny

When the judge sentenced me to nine months, I thought it was the end of the world. Johnny had left the dock with a sentence of life imprisonment: a life of frustration, violence, boredom and futility.

Sarah and I read our letters out to each other. Many of my friends wrote regularly, once a week, to fill me in on what was going on outside: who had a new boyfriend, job or car. One person wrote to me every day, even if it was only two lines to tell me what he had learnt at law school. We also talked about our boyfriends; not that I had one, but there was someone I thought of. I had begun to fall for him while I was on bail, only four weeks before my case came to court. He was calm and tolerant of my mood changes and excessive behaviour. He wrote to me, and in my mind, the affair took off dramatically.

My friend, whom I shall call T, had no idea of what I was beginning to expect from him. He was offering me friendship and support, which I was blowing up out of all proportion. Prison does that. Romantic thought was a good way of filling in the lazy hours. Many women became obsessed in this way, either for a man on the outside, or a woman on the inside, victims of what a friend whom I was to meet later on called 'prison bollocks'.

Sarah, on the other hand, was obsessed with how not to be obsessed by her older man, whom I shall call Rob. She tried to write to him, but always scrunched up her

efforts in a fit of dissatisfaction. She was in awe of his erudition and tried unsuccessfully to emulate it when writing to him. Rob promised that he would come and visit her as soon as he was released, which was not long. 'I don't want to see him,' she screeched, when she got his letter. Even I could see through that.

8

The pressure of the press was relentless. Soon after I arrived at Bullwood, an article had appeared claiming that I had been moved in secret to a 'cushy nick', because, it said, I had not been able to cope with Holloway. The inmates on Kestrel wing were half-amused and half-indignant when they saw the article.

'Cushy nick, eh? I'd like to see them emptying their piss down the sloosh every morning.'

'Yeah, and shovel shit . . . '

One girl, Mandy, was so incensed about this mis-presentation of Bullwood that she asked the Governor for permission to write to the newspaper and set the record straight. She was not allowed to. Mandy was one of the two kitchen workers on our wing. As well as being determined for people to see Bullwood 'for what it is', she was sympathetic to me about the publicity and we became friends. On Sunday nights, the vegans had peanut-butter sandwiches for supper. 'I'll butter yours extra thick, they'll be on the bottom of the pile,' she would whisper. She was small and very fat, yet apparently her mother had worried about how much weight she was losing in prison.

Just before Christmas, I had been called into the Governor's office. I liked her more than the AGs I had met at Holloway (I never met the Governor there), although, because of the nature of her position, she was not universally liked by the inmates. I thought her fair and polite. She did not treat me, or the other inmates like idiots.

On her desk was a newspaper cutting. I saw the uncompromising headlines, 'Lesbian torment for prison girl Rosie'. The imagination of the press had reached farcical proportions. The Governor was very serious about the article, since, she said, it breached prison security. The story said that officers from Holloway and Bullwood had spoken to members of the press about my supposed nightmares and torrid attacks by rampant lesbians.

'Do you know someone called Stacey Smith?' the Governor asked. She was talking about the Stacey with whom I had shared a dormitory at Holloway. It turned out that Stacey had sold a story to a tabloid. Ironically, she had warned me that I should never trust anyone, in case they sold a story to the press. I thought the article hilarious. It was such rubbish that I admired her for it – had she told them things that I had really said and done, it would have been boring and un-newsworthy.

The Governor was upset by the claim that one of her officers had broken the rule of not talking to the press. I was inclined to think that the press had made that up, to give their story greater credibility. The inmates on Kestrel wing were shocked by Stacey's behaviour, but I defended her. The rats from Fleet Street must have offered her a substantial amount of money and how many other ex-cons would have resisted it? Amused as I was, I had to put up with teasing as a result of that article: what were the nature of these lesbian attacks, and had I really minded all that much? 'Cor, I can just imagine you being fondled in that cupboard!' was the sort of remark, accompanied by salacious nudges and winks, that I grew to expect.

Not long after Christmas, a couple of journalists from the *Southend Evening Echo* came to write a feature on Christmas inside. I was advised by the Governor that they would probably seek me out, because of all the

recent publicity, but that if I didn't want to talk to them, I should stay in my cell.

At dinnertime, they arrived on Kestrel wing: a young man, and a woman, fashionably dressed with peroxide-blonde hair cut into a bob. I was still sitting on a table with Trish and Maggie, who I could see were excited by the presence of reporters. Maggie sat facing in their direction, hoping to catch their eyes. Gradually, they worked their way over to us.

'I expect you've come to say hello to our celebrity,' said Maggie, a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

'So which one of you is Rosie?' asked the woman, in a voice which should have been used for lavatory-paper advertisements.

'That's 'er,' said Maggie, loving it.

She asked me in a sympathetic voice why I had found Holloway so difficult to deal with.

Enraged, I blurted out the truth: that the newspaper reports had been rubbish, that I had wanted to stay at Holloway, and that anyone who described Bullwood as a cushy nick was mad. While I ranted on, the reporter was scribbling away. Sarah was nudging me to shut up, knowing that all I was doing was giving them a story, but I had the bit between my teeth. I was fed up with the whole business of the press fabricating stories about my being given preferential treatment and my inability to cope.

It was a relief to get it off my chest.

After dinner, they took some photographs. Mandy from the kitchen came into our cell and delighted in having her picture taken for the papers. We treated it as a joke, a break in routine. Before the reporters left, I made the photographer write out a written guarantee that none of the material gained would be sold on to a national newspaper. The following Sunday there was a huge double-page spread in the *Sunday People:* "Prison will not break drugs girl Rosie'. The article was harmless

enough; it was my own stupidity at not anticipating the repercussions that upset me.

The Governor called me into her office. She was very kind, and did not say, I told you to stay in your cell. She allowed me to ring up my parents and warn them about the piece. There followed a confused telephone call: I was trying to sound worried about what their reaction to the article in the papers would be; Mum, at the other end, was saying that she couldn't care less about the article, she was just over the moon to hear my voice. At the same time I couldn't help sounding excited, imagining her sitting by the fire, with her portable phone, the kitchen door open and the wireless on. Soon my time was up, and I went back to the wing. The reaction of the inmates was one of suppressed glee and overt indignation. 'Isn't it an outrage that the *Echo* sold the story when they promised not to . . . "Imagine taking advantage like that . . . "Is there a picture of me anywhere, Jackie? No? Oh shit . . . '

Mandy from the kitchen came huffing and puffing into our cell. The *Echo* hadn't asked her permission to publish a photograph of her in the paper: should she get a solicitor? What compensation could she expect? I said that since she posed for the photograph willingly, she would probably do better to forget it. She stormed off, spluttering about how she was going to sue the buggers, apparently forgetting that in the same cell, she had muscled her way into every photograph that was taken.

While on bail I had been seeing a psychotherapist in Oxford who had been helping me to come to terms with the events leading up to my arrest. The prison authorities had agreed to let her visit me on the grounds that my mental health needed to be checked by someone who had been monitoring it consistently. When she came to see me, we sat and talked things over for an hour. It was wonderful to see her, but I could not forget that

my mother had driven her to the prison all the way from Oxford, since her own car was not working, and was now sitting in the car by the prison gates. She had begged to be allowed to see me. The Wing Chief had informed me that she was outside, and that if I wanted to see her, it would have to be under proper visiting restrictions. That would have meant forfeiting my next visit which was to be from my two elder sisters and T, the person I was keen on. Half an hour with Mum would have meant no visit for a month, so I chose not to see her. Thinking of her sitting there, knowing how close I was, made me miserable.

The weekends in between the ones when I had a visit were the worst, with only food and letters to look forward to. On one of these, Sarah and I awoke to see pristine snow covering the prison grounds. Half the barbed-wire boundary had disappeared in drifts. The snow snuffed out the prison's greying aspect, making it clean and clinical, like an asylum. Beyond the fence's perimeter, the trees were frozen and magical, like a theatre set. Snow always makes me feel excited, at the thought of tearing into the cushiony cold, falling backwards to print my shape in it and throwing snowballs. We could not do these things. We stared at the untouched whiteness through bars, wishing we could go whooping out into the silence.

That weekend, the fire engines came. Sirens wailed, and the fire alarm droned on for hours. Someone had set fire to their cell. We all hung out of the windows, trying to find out what was going on. Rumours flew.

'It's Sheila; she done 'er cell in 'cos they put 'er on report . . . '

'Well I know that Jane said she'd 'ad enough . . . been down the block for a good two weeks now, she 'as.'

Other inmates took this occurrence in their stride. Sarah and I were amazed and frightened by the arrival of the fire brigade, and the 'routine procedure' attitude with which everything was done. The engines stayed

for a long while, their revolving beacons flashing light into our cell.

I remembered the charred cell I had seen from my window at Holloway with its blackened walls and bars, like a diseased mouth. Was setting fire to a cell a cry for attention, I wondered, a manifestation of frustration or an expression of bitterness at a life outside which held no material benefit for 'going straight'?

Many of the recidivist inmates I was doing time with had been brought up in children's homes, or felt rejected or misunderstood by their families. Those who had been in care had learnt to protect the food on their plates from an early age. Many had been fostered out to families, not knowing how long that set of parents would last. Often, this transient, unsettling existence bred a desire in the girl to break away and be responsible for herself, beholden to no one. Often the quickest way to earn money, and so independence, was illegally, through stealing handbags, forging cheques and burglary. For these girls a life of crime was exciting, proving that they could make it on their own. The two-thirds of the inmates who were YCs when I was at Bullwood were mostly serving sentences for petty theft, 'joeying' (snatching handbags), 'kiting' (forging cheques) or 'hoisting' (shoplifting). Many women had children, although the YC offenders were still only children themselves: they were single parents who had stolen and thieved because the material results of crime were richer and more immediate than by living within the law. Few of them regretted what they had done.

It was not surprising that many became recidivists. The reconviction rates given for the year 1987 showed that 34 per cent of female offenders are reconvicted within two years of being released from custody. Sixty-five per cent of the young offenders are reconvicted. For recidivists, prison was part of the run of things, to be got through before the next job could be planned. There is no real punishment or reform in a prison sentence for those who

motto is 'If you can't do the time, don't do the crime'. Prison offered little help with the problems that had led them to crime, and was unlikely to persuade them not to return to it.

I met women who live lives of hardened recidivism, and see nothing wrong with committing fraud, burglary, even armed burglary. In prison, they learn how to do the next job without being caught: no one can do a prison sentence without finding out more about how to commit various types of crime than they are likely to have known before they went in. For these reasons, and because prison offers little in the way of training and rehabilitation, prison not only does nothing to decrease crime, but if anything perpetuates it. Long sentences compound these effects.

There were many girls who had committed their crimes as a result of being drunk. For example, Trish had caused grievous bodily harm to the bouncer who had tried to beat up her boyfriend because she had been 'so bloody pissed. I could 'ardly stand up'. Laurie, Mina's younger friend, could not tell her story without breaking down with laughter. She and her friend had been on probation for theft. One night they got drunk and decided to go and mess up their probation officer's office, as a joke. They helped themselves to the sherry in the cupboard and rifled through the drawers, not realising that one of them had set off a tape recorder, which recorded them throughout. Another girl with whom I became friendly was given nine months for stealing a bottle of vodka from an off-licence when she was pissed.

It was difficult to understand the purpose of the length of some of the women's sentences – like that of Alice. Quiet and unassuming, with a broad smile, she was always polite, never shouted and never joined in the aggro on the wing. When her younger sister was fifteen, she asked Alice, who was then eighteen, if she would go into the off-licence and buy her and her friends some

booze, which Alice did. Her sister and her friends went off and got plastered, then beat someone up. When they were arrested, it transpired that Alice had been the one responsible for buying them the booze. As drink was the cause of the violence, Alice was held responsible for the whole episode and judged guilty of GBH (even though she had not directly perpetrated the violence). She was given six years in prison.

There was an Indian lady at Holloway on my wing. Quiet and polite, and popular with her fellow prisoners, she had been living in rented accommodation in London for many years. She was poor and could not afford the rent increase imposed upon her by her landlady. After months of being pestered for the overdue rent, the Indian lady snapped and hit her landlady over the head. She was given a life sentence for murder (life being a minimum of ten to twelve years).

From talking to so many offenders and hearing their cases, I became aware of the many and various reasons for committing crime, the differences between inmates' attitudes to it and how in so many ways the system appeared ineffective. The more I talked to other women in prison, the more I came to regard prison as a social dumping ground: a way of removing women from society to which they were little actual danger, and by doing so achieving nothing.

I wondered whether judges spend sufficient time assessing a crime in relation to the reasons for it having been committed and taking into account the probation officer's report on it, when making the decision as to whether there is any value in sending the offender to prison at all and how long the sentence should be.

Perhaps a custodial sentence is supposed to deter; but I met many women for whom the length of sentence was counter-productive. They said that for them a short, sharp shock would have been more effective: after three or four weeks their sense of disgrace and shock gave

way to a more casual acceptance of their lot, and getting used to prison life diminished the deterrent factor. Nor were many women deterred by other people's sentences: their attitude was that because of the arbitary nature of sentencing in this country, a sentence given out to one person as a deterrent does not mean that others who commit the same crime will go to prison.

We now know that the prisons in England and Wales are full to bursting, and that the government's solution is to build yet more. Having been on the inside, I know that this is not the answer. Society may feel the need to punish those who break the law, but is prison the right way of doing so? Some offenders must be removed from society, either because they are a danger to themselves, or to those around them; we all need to feel protected from murderers, rapists and terrorists. However, in my opinion, there are a vast number of criminals whose sentences are pointlessly long, or who should never have been sent to prison in the first place and who could, and should, be dealt with on the other side of the wall. The debate on punishment and prison reform is a complex one, but my own experience convinced me that there is a need for a more constructive approach to be explored.

The deep snow prevented many of the prison workers from coming in. I had applied for a job soon after I arrived and was due to start working in the laundry, but I was unable to do so because my boss was absent; the education block was severely depleted as well. The most worrying aspect of the weather was the effect that it was having on our meals. The drive from the main road in Hockley to the prison was blocked, so no supplies could be driven to the gate. Our bread was being made by Chelmsford prison and carried up the drive on foot. The amount of food we were given began to diminish, as did its already questionable quality. It was tea that caused the worst problems. We were being given less

and less, yet tea was our last meal between 4.30 p.m. and 8 a.m. the next morning, apart from a biscuit or apple at suppertime. If one meal a day had to be cut down to minimal proportions, then it should have been dinner, not tea. Complaints and abuse were rife.

The snow caused other problems. There was no post, which meant that there was nothing to look forward to; and it showed on the faces of the inmates. Sarah and I had come to rely on our daily letters to such an extent that being without post was like having our oxygen cut off.

The prison ran on a shoestring for a week before things slowly began to return to normal, but women whose families lived far away found their visits were cancelled due to travelling conditions and because the sporadic post had prevented Visiting Orders from reaching their destinations.

When the post started to function again, I received many letters from male prisoners who had seen the article in the *Sunday People*. However, I was no longer the real reason for writing since they had seen the photograph of Sarah: 'Please ask your friend to write to me, I think I've fallen in love with her . . . '

Eventually, the man in charge of the laundry was able to get to work, and I started my new job. Because of the disruption caused by the snow, we had had little association and no exercise, so it was a boon to be able to get away from the wing.

In the laundry, a tall bearded man in a white overall greeted me. He looked like a dusty ancestral portrait, with his mournful expression and laconic manner; he spoke quietly into his beard, his words disappearing amongst the roar of washing-machines and rotary irons. This was the boss, Mr Ship. He showed me around the laundry, and demonstrated how to use the various machines, which were old and noisy. Everything thrust into them was scoured with abrasive prison detergent; sheets, towels and 'whites' were further assaulted by

a measuring jug of bleach. It was not surprising that many of the girls developed rashes and allergies. The large, squarish room was divided down the middle by wooden tables, on which we folded the newly washed and dried things. Along one side of the room were washing-machines and tumble-driers. On the other side was the rotary iron, through which we put the sheets, bedcovers, pillowcases, gym T-shirts, kitchen towels and cloths, and other miscellaneous bits and pieces. Further along the wall were shelves labelled with the names of the wings, where the laundry was piled up ready to be distributed.

After my lesson in machine-handling, Mr Ship took me into his office and explained the wage system to me. The starting rate for laundry work was £1.50 per week. This was to go up every fortnight. As I was still paying back the advance I had been given at Holloway at a rate of 10p per week, the money was less than it looked on paper. All the same, I was glad to have the job – it was time away from the wing and more money to spend at canteen.

There were three other inmates working in the laundry. Sheila was pretty and blonde, and smiled at me when we were introduced. Jo, who was skinny with short, reddish hair and a masculine swagger, smiled too. Lorraine, who was short and dumpy, with her hair in pigtails, did not.

'Your Mum's got a right cheek, saying we're all thieves and prostitutes. Are you that much better then?' she started saying.

I tried to explain that it was the papers who had made that claim, not my mother, but she was not convinced, and ignored me.

The others were friendly and high-spirited. They amused themselves by heckling the long-suffering Mr Ship.

''Ere, Mr Shit . . . ooh, sorry, I mean Mr Ship . . . got any fags f'rus? Wot about some biccies then? Can we have some coffee? If you say no, I'll tell the Gov about the bra and suspenders I found in yer 'andbag!'

Mr Ship never rose to the bait, and rarely smiled, but he was a kind man, and allowed us cups of tea and coffee which he provided. He also gave us cigarettes from time to time, and he brought us in biscuits. Jo was the one who used to push him the hardest, but he never rose to her taunts.

'Hey, Mr Ship, how old were you when you first had sex? Were you a virgin when you got married? What's your wife's favourite position?'

'How should I know?'

Jo screamed with laughter and carried on pestering him with questions about sex, asking him why he didn't talk about it with his wife.

'Well, it's not the sort of thing you discuss over a cup of tea, is it?' was the reply.

It wasn't long before I started teasing him too, and hassling him for biscuits.

Mr Ship kept the wireless on in the laundry, so we spent our working hours listening to music. Compared to the other jobs on offer around the prison, we were not badly off.

The workshop, for instance, where Sarah was working, was less relaxed: it was colder, the wages were lower, and the work was done under the watchful eyes of screws, rather than under a civilian manager. Things in the laundry improved further when Lorraine changed jobs and I no longer had to look at her surly face as she squeezed pillowcases through the rotary iron for me to fold on the other side.

Sheila and Jo were both good company. Sheila was a YC in for kiting; she had done almost a year when I met her. She was motherly and kind but, like Jack on my wing, admitted to having a terrible temper. She told me about her boyfriend, who gave her a rough time, beating her up and taking advantage of her. Otherwise she knew few people on the outside. She hadn't had a visit for eight months. Her passion was knitting, and she used to bring

whatever she was making into the laundry with her. Mr Ship did not mind this, but some screws forbade it.

Jo was a streetwise lesbian, in for dealing heroin. She had been a junkie for many years, but said that she had decided to kick the habit. She was in her early thirties, and had a son of thirteen whom she adored. She was witty and foul-mouthed. Her stories about her lesbian frolics were extremely funny, and left nothing to the imagination. She had recently had an affair with a young black girl who claimed to be seventeen. It turned out that she was fifteen, but had been thirteen at the time of her imprisonment. She lied to everyone, but her probation officer had tracked down her mother, who had confirmed her true age. Jo said she was 'a bit fazed' when she found out, but her partner was insistent that the affair should carry on – not that Jo ever wanted it to stop. Jo used to threaten to tell the newspapers that we had had an affair. 'That'd make yer folks sit up a bit!' she would say.

For a while there were just the three of us in the laundry, and we became quite cosy. As well as teasing Mr Ship, we used to rag with each other, shoving each other into the laundry trolleys and spinning them around the room. Mr Ship's most extreme form of disapproval was a glower from the recesses of his bushy eyebrows.

Our work was not strenuous. We had to load and operate the machines, empty them, and sort out what went through the rotary iron and what had to be ironed by hand. Then we made piles for the relevant houses, the kitchen and the hospital wing. Returning the kitchen laundry was a chance to cadge any leftovers; going to the different wings was a chance to shout messages to other prisoners – Jo knew almost everyone, and yelled greetings wherever she went. Our hours of labour were from 8.45 to 11.10 a.m. and from 2.00 to 4.00 p.m. It was not a long working day, although sometimes the tedious nature of the jobs made the hours stand still.

It was easier to while away the time in the cell with

Sarah. We pooled our wages each week and split everything equally. We began to share our rollies, instead of making one each every time we wanted a smoke. When we first started doing this, the other women thought that we had gone crazy, and were sharing a joint for all to see, but they soon got used to it.

Jack and Trish accused us of being lesbians: 'Wouldn't mind being a fly on the wall when you two are banged up . . . '; 'I bet you get up to all sorts of 'anky panky . . . ' We didn't care about the accusations: they were made in fun. We did not have a physical relationship, but mentally, we had become very close. With our settled routine, in some ways we were like an old, retired couple. After every meal, we made ourselves a hot drink out of soya milk and boiled water. Depending on the state of our vegan supplies, we ate peanut-butter sandwiches or bowls of muesli during the day. We talked a lot about life after prison, and how we would go out, armoured against failure, girded to succeed. Sarah wanted to return to modelling, make money and set up her own business; she wanted to prove to herself that she could live in London and not give in to the temptations which lay in every corner. We both believed that she could do it; nothing seemed easier, when we were sitting in the protected little world of Cell Six. We began to think that our friendship had been planned by a greater power than ourselves. We discovered links – places we'd been, people we'd met – that strengthened our belief that our meeting was inevitable. We were certain that our friendship had been sent as something good, a way in which we could both make sense of the mess we found ourselves in. This bond showed in our behaviour and we were seldom apart, which is probably what made Trish, Jack and others think that we were lesbians.

Trish was a frequent visitor to our cell, unlike Maggie, who had begun to show contempt for Sarah and me. Trish was in a permanent flurry over her love life; she got

through many lightning romances and it was hard to keep track. She had split up with her last girlfriend because Trish reckoned that she was being used: her new fancy had 'blanked' her (ignored her advances) which Trish said was 'doin' 'er 'ead in'. Maggie was going steady with her new love, the prison 'macho', and her pride at being the doll of this feared strong woman made her behaviour even more insufferable. She insulted anyone who crossed her path, including me, and the screws.

Although the prison was returning to normal, travelling conditions were still deplorable and I began to worry that my weekend visit might not take place since my visitors had a long way to come. It was the turn of my two older sisters, Clara and Lily, who were bringing T with them.

While I was worrying about whether or not they would be able to come, the AG summoned me to his office to inform me that Lord Longford had arranged to visit me the next day, Saturday. Two visits in one weekend was manna from heaven for a bored inmate. I had never met Lord Longford, but knew that my mother had a tenuous acquaintance with him, and I had known one of his grandsons who was at Oxford.

I had been worrying that travelling might prove too much for my sisters, let alone for a peer in his eighties, but I needn't have bothered: Lord Longford bounded into the prison without a thought for the snow. We were allowed an hour together during which we chatted non-stop. I took to him enormously. He entertained and amused me for the entire visit, discussing all sorts of things – justice, Myra Hindley, publishing. I was sorry when he left, but he promised to come again. He said that I had a 'charming, mobile face', which was music to my ears, since I was determined to look charming for the visit the next day.

Word of his visit had reached the ears of the inmates.

Because of his support for Myra Hindley, many female prisoners disliked him, calling him 'loony' or 'sick'.

'You must have done something pretty bad for tha' nutter to visit you,' said a girl scrubbing the corridor.

'He's not a nutter,' I replied, 'so bugger off.'

I was allowed a visit from Lord Longford because it is the right of any member of the House of Lords to make a 'parliamentary visit'. Like Mrs P who visited me in Holloway, Lord Longford cheered me up immensely. Somehow, I found it easier talking to someone whom I didn't know but who was familiar with the prison system. I did not feel that I had to try to be happy for his sake, nor did I have to amuse him with lurid tales of prison happenings. Many women found it easier to talk to a Prison Visitor than to their families. If they were miserable, they said so, instead of hiding behind a façade of forced joviality for their children, husband or parents.

By the time of the next visit the following day, I was a clammy-handed nervous wreck. The person I imagined myself to be in love with was going to be sitting in the same room, just a few inches away from me, in a matter of hours. Sarah laughed at me as I hogged the tiny, dirty mirror in our cell all morning, experimenting with shades of hideous lipstick that we had bought with private spends and brushing my hair into weird shapes. It was all right for Sarah – she could come out of a mud bath looking gorgeous. I was as white as bread and puffy from lack of exercise.

I was worrying about how to handle the meeting: my two sisters would be there, so we wouldn't have any privacy and I hardly knew T anyway. Sarah gave me tips, like don't stare at him too much, don't stuff your face with sweets from the visiting canteen as it doesn't look nice, and above all, be composed and possibly slightly tragic, like a Brontë heroine.

Armed with these hints, I waited for my name to be

called over the tannoy system. Eventually, my visit was announced and I was escorted along the corridors, as if I was about to board at Gate 13. The factory was freezing as I sat waiting, dressed in Sarah's jumper and leggings. She had a visit too, but was more interested to see what mine looked like.

Then they were there, my two sisters Clara and Lily, hugging me tightly, looking to see how I was. All the time I was aware of T's presence; he was standing slightly back, not wishing to intrude. I gave him a kiss on the cheek, and we all sat down, me with my hands under the table, so that no one would see them shaking.

'So what's the gossip?' I asked Clara. She was looking excited and secretive.

'I haven't told anyone but these two,' she said, 'but I'm engaged.'

I stood up and screamed, probably as a result of the build-up of nervous tension: I made the most appalling noise. I could almost hear Sarah thinking, Oh no, what *is* she doing? After I had sat down and tried to regain my composure, Clara told me all about it, and how he had proposed while she was in the bath. She hadn't even told Mum and Dad. The news was wonderful, because I knew they thought he was perfect for her. A wedding would be something to look forward to, and would certainly take Mum's mind off my imprisonment.

T did not say much throughout the visit, but then there wasn't much he could do, after Clara had dropped her bit of cataclysmic news. Every now and then I sneaked a look at him, even though Sarah had told me to be cool. Five minutes before the end, I suddenly wanted them to go. It was almost too painful. I longed to be back in the safety of Cell Six with Sarah, analysing the visit. Dreams and conjecture were much easier than these real-life happenings. But I didn't want them to go either. As they stood up, my chin began to quiver. T gave me a hug, and promised to write.

'Bye then,' I said, and turned away.

After the frisk (Sarah was singled out for a strip-search, although they didn't tell her why) we sat in the cell, scooping peanut butter from the jar with our fingers.

'I think he loves me,' I said. 'But then, he's bound to have another girlfriend. He can't be expected to wait for a pasty-faced con.'

'Shut up,' said Sarah, 'and if you carry on eating peanut butter like that, you'll be fat as well.'

I told her about Clara's engagement, and she shared my excitement. But the inevitable depression soon set in. They planned to marry three weeks after my EDR (earliest date of release). I spent that night pining for the warmth and comfort of home, the jollity and excitement, the love and affection.

Trish came into the cell after our visits, and we had a long chat. She had had a letter from her geezer, John, who claimed that he still loved her, even though he beat her regularly. Trish was still hooked on him, but did not want to go back to him when they had both finished their sentences. She had written a letter telling him this, in her usual blunt way.

'I told 'im I wished 'e'd drop dead, right?' she said. 'I said that I 'oped 'e didn't get 'is parole, and that I fucked 'is best mate. I'm goin' on 'oliday wiv 'im and all, and 'e's buyin' me a car. I've 'ad enough of John fumpin' me. The kids are gettin' too old for that now, know what I mean? It gets a bit much . . . 'e leaves me on me own wiv the kids so I goes on the game . . . I didn't do it dirty though, I went to the doctor's, 'ad me check-ups and that, but when 'e finds out, he just fumps me again . . . I've been doin' the streets since I was twelve and I don't want that life no more. The kids deserve sumfink better than that.'

Trish did not know what she would do when she left prison. She knew nothing except a life dodging

the law. She put a lot of hope into her geezer's best mate, the one who said he would buy her a car and take her on holiday. But she knew that it was a pipe-dream; he would probably let her down like all the rest.

9

Every new inmate at Bullwood was given a sheet of paper describing the courses and classes there were to choose from, including cookery, DIY, yoga, art, typing and office skills. The problem was that these classes were often cancelled. I put my name down for typing, a course that Trish had also wanted to do, but, like her, was told that there were no vacancies, so I applied for DIY and guitar. Nothing happened for some time; my name did not appear on any of the class lists on the wing noticeboard. Then one afternoon I was fetched from the laundry and told that I was going to my DIY course.

The man taking the session had a benign smile. He held up a board with two demonstration sockets attached to it and a light switch. He then held up two plugs, one with square pins, one with round.

'I would like to demonstrate,' he began in a quiet, shuffly voice, 'that you cannot put a plug with square pins into a socket with round holes. The next thing I would like to demonstrate,' he carried on, ignoring the incredulous stares of his pupils, 'is that if you push this switch down, like this' – he pushed the switch down on the demonstration board – 'it will activate the electricity to turn on the light.' The light went on.

That was the only DIY class I ever went to. We were all in the dark as to why the classes were so patchy, but I was often told that the education staff were on holiday or that it was half-term. Although each prison I went to had an education department, I found it difficult to establish how important a role the

discipline staff thought that education should play in the life of a convict.

It is possible that the role of education was a confused one because the authorities (screws, AGs etc.) didn't themselves know what they were trying to achieve through the prison system. I found that virtually every screw had a different attitude towards the prisoners: helping, bullying, punishing, reforming. I found little consistency of treatment, and as a result education appeared to be uncomfortably trying to squeeze itself into an agenda that nobody fully understood. If the general aim of a women's prison was to see the inmates re-establish their lives on the outside with jobs and a crime-free way of life, it would make sense to develop the education facilities offered by prison much more than at present, and provide women like Trish with concrete training of some kind.

Prison appeared to me to be doing very little to help convicts work out how and why they went wrong or to examine and act upon the social causes that lie behind their criminal activity. Far from offering constructive measures, prison has a damaging effect on some convicts, caused by the influence of other corrupting inmates, the sometimes violent atmosphere, the availability of drugs, the sharing of criminal techniques. The added physical hardships of a place like Bullwood, acknowledged by the authorities to be of low quality, have the negative effect of reducing personal dignity to a minimum. Women who resign themselves to squalid conditions, being locked up with a potty to piss in and bullied by screws, often end up behaving like animals, or worse. Eighty per cent of women are sentenced to custody for non-violent crimes, but many end up becoming violent prisoners, either through self-mutilation, setting fire to a cell or fighting with another inmate – behaviour which they might, in better circumstances, never have contemplated. Given these effects, and the high rate of recidivism, it is hard to see what benefit or purpose prison has served either

to the offenders or to the society from which they have been removed.

An analysis of official figures by NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders) showed that criminals are more likely to be sent to prison by courts, and face longer sentences, than they were ten years ago: 21 per cent of adult men and 8 per cent of women convicted of indictable offences were sent to prison, compared with 17 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women in 1977.

However, the possibilities of more constructive, non-custodial sentences are being explored. For example, a pilot scheme known as 'tracking' was introduced in 1988 to help offenders avoid crime. It has been described as a more intensive version of probation, in which the offender is monitored by an individual 'sponsor', who helps him or her to achieve certain goals and aims, the chief of which is to stay out of trouble. The purpose of tracking is to try to change the way the offender thinks about crime, and his or her future. Other options open to judges and magistrates when sentencing, that avoid removing the offender from society, include probation supervision and community service orders. Electronic tagging, which is already being tested in the United States, is to be introduced under a pilot system in England. It involves maintaining telephone contact with prisoners on remand, so that they are free to live in their own homes and go to work.

The effectiveness and efficiency of such alternatives to custody have yet to be proved (electronic tagging, for instance, has so far been beset by technological and ethical problems), but given the flaws of the prison system it is important that they should be explored and developed.

One reason for giving an offender a supervised chance on the outside is that keeping an offender in prison for three weeks is more expensive than supervising him or her on probation or community service for a year. During

the financial year 1987-8 it cost an average of £275 a week to keep an offender in prison; had I, for example, been given community service, it would have cost £690 for a year (and I would have been helping mentally handicapped children in Wantage). Although considerations of cost do not solve a moral or social argument, they illustrate that money might be more effectively spent.

In prison I met many women who led a life of recidivism and were not deterred by a prison sentence, but treated it as a way of life; there were women whose lives were shattered by doing time, having done something impulsive and out of character through desperation, drink or drugs; I heard of those who rejoined the outside world who were never reconvicted but did not stop offending. A prison sentence was achieving nothing for them; other methods of punishment, at considerably less public expense, might have helped these individuals, and hence society, much more.

The initiatives of non-custodial sentences are encouraging and it is to be hoped that they will continue. In July 1988 the Government issued a Green Paper on punishment, custody and the community, in which it was recognised that prison is not the most effective way of dealing with crime. Perhaps reform now lies ahead; certainly much is needed.

One morning, while the other laundry girls and I were dropping off the clean sheets to my wing, Maggie and Trish, our wing cleaners, were sitting at a table, looking livid.

'Did you leave your potty in the sloosh, then?' Maggie asked me.

Each morning I emptied my potty, then put it under the sloosh while I used the wing lavatory. I must have forgotten to pick it up again. Maggie was delighted. It gave her an ideal opportunity to pick on me.

'Imagine leaving a dirty potty around for other people

to clean up. You think you own this fuckin' place, don't you? Well, we've thrown it away, and you can bleedin' well ask Archer for a new one.'

I explained that the potty was not dirty, and that I had not left it there on purpose, but my explanation fell on deaf ears. I returned to the laundry in a filthy mood.

Not much more was said about the potty; Maggie made the odd remark but that did not bother me very much. However, a week later, things got out of hand. It was my fault: stupidly, I made the same mistake. I made no laundry delivery to Kestrel that morning so I had no warning of what was to come at lunchtime. As soon as I walked into the wing at 11.20 a.m. Maggie let me have it.

'Fuckin', filthy whore,' she yelled, catching the attention of the entire wing. 'I've lost my job because of you. Lady Muck 'ere left her potty in the sloosh *again* for one of us commoners to clean . . . well I told Archer that I 'ain't 'ere to be yer personal maid, so she told me I could stuff me job if that was me attitude. So bollocks to you and yer dirty 'abits, I lost me job 'cos of what you done.'

I took my place in the dinner queue, sweating with embarrassment. Everyone was quiet except Maggie, who carried on whispering. I avoided meeting anyone's eye. Sarah stood behind me saying nothing; suffering on my behalf. The prospect of having to sit with Maggie after I had collected my food was hanging like the sword of Damocles over my head. Was she going to hit me? Would I be taunted and ridiculed by everyone on the wing? I held out my plate for mushy peas and vegan mince, then slowly walked to the table, where Maggie and Trish were already seated. Maggie spooned her food into her wide mouth without taking her eyes off my face, saying nothing. I desperately wanted to pluck up the courage to tell her not to be so idiotic, and to drop the subject of the potty, but I was not brave enough. Whatever I said would have sounded self-pitying. Instead, I did my best to ignore her.

As soon as I left the table, Maggie started again. The words potty and filthy bitch were audible above the furtive whispers. I had to make an effort not to go over and punch her face in, but she was obviously stronger than I. Apart from tussling with my sisters, I had only once ever been provoked into slapping someone; yet here I was, contemplating a fight over a potty. This was what prison life had reduced me to. I knew that with Maggie, fisticuffs would not be safe: I would be flattened and appear even more of a fool. I gritted my teeth and cursed Bullwood and its degrading conditions which had led to the mess I was in. Reminding myself that it wasn't for ever wasn't much comfort at the time.

I spent the afternoon reading a book on Jung, but any intellectual theory was lost on me: Jung's psychology was of no interest when I was suffering the after-effects of Maggie's invective. At teatime, Maggie's attitude was the same: no communication – just stony stares. When I went to fill our bucket with water, I found Trish by the tap.

'You shouldn't let Maggie upset you . . . ' she began.

'Maggie is a stupid cow with a big mouth,' I butted in. 'Someone should teach her a lesson.'

Someone emerged through the steam from the bathroom. It was Maggie.

'Go on, say it to me face then,' she challenged me, looking like a female Sumo wrestler.

I did, because there was little else I could do. There followed a tongue-lashing, vituperative argument. Inmates gathered around the door of the recess to hear what was going on. Maggie's insolent face and rough, war-dog expression disgusted me. But my insults were ineffective compared to her trump card: I had left my potty in the sloosh for a second time, which clearly made me a pervert.

I pushed my way through the crowd of silent spectators and marched back to the cell, spilling water everywhere. Sarah tried to calm me by pointing out how

petty and babyish the argument was. I envied her ability to stay above it all while I sank deeper into the mud of prison bitchiness.

It was getting harder, not easier, to think of six months as a transient period that would soon be over. In that enclosed environment it was what was happening each day that was important. I dreaded being given the cold shoulder by the other prisoners on the wing. So far, I was proud of the way that I had managed to get on with most of them and the thought of being shunned by all depressed and terrified me.

Although I had caused Maggie to lose her job only indirectly, she blamed the incident on me. It was a battle scar she wore proudly, and one which she thought would ensure a drop in my popularity stakes. She took great pleasure in moaning loudly about her sharp cut in wages whenever I was around. Not surprisingly, Sarah and I moved tables to get away from her constant sniping; the tension at mealtimes had become unbearable. To my immense relief, the episode did not affect the way that the other inmates behaved towards me. Many were relieved to see Maggie stripped of her wing-cleaning job, which meant that she was locked in her cell for longer periods of time, instead of prancing around the wing lording it over inmates and screws alike. Behind Maggie's back, the whispers were that she had 'gone too far'.

I had to go and collect another new potty from Mrs Archer, the Wing Chief, who gave me a lecture.

'I'm sure that you can't help being vague, but you must accept that Maggie's reaction was inevitable. If you can't look after yourself in prison, don't expect anyone else to. Now this is the last potty I am going to give you, so make sure you hang on to it.'

I liked Mrs Archer, and took note of what she said. She was right, after all. Being vague was not an excuse, in the same way that at school being vague was not an excuse to forget to do your prep. But at school I had

been an immature, hyper-active teenager. Now I was twenty-three: it was absurd to think that I had got myself involved in a fight over a potty.

It was common practice for the screws to leave the inmates to sort out their differences without interfering, unless things got completely out of hand. Swearing at officers was a reportable offence, but many of them ignored it if it didn't happen too often. Sheila and Jo in the laundry claimed to have horrible screws on their wings; Kestrel had not fared so badly.

Many of the screws on our wing lived locally, in and around Hockley. Some of them, like Mrs Archer, were married with children, which gave them a complete change from prison life after they had hung up their keys. There were older, unmarried screws on Kestrel too, but they were more odd than cruel or unkind.

There was one screw at Bullwood whom all the inmates adored; she was responsible for the library, and used to come round on Tuesday nights, chasing up all the overdue library books. Eccentric and kind, she had a smiling bird-like way. Often, she behaved as if she was drunk, bumping into the wall, dropping the books and giggling. She called me 'knicker-washer' because of the laundry job. I never heard any of the girls being aggressive with her, nor did she put anyone on report while I was there.

Another popular screw was Miss Doyle. She looked like a senior politician with her expressionless face and humourless smile which belied an excellent sense of humour. Her jokes were achingly funny, because of her dead-pan delivery. She took the mickey out of herself, the other screws and the inmates, but not in order to gain favour with us. She was not a 'soft touch' however, and was known to put girls on report if she thought they deserved it.

Another screw was desperate to be liked, but was hated for her two-faced tactics. Her attempts to win popularity

were thwarted by her terror of not being in control. She put inmates on report at the drop of a hat, then could not understand why she was booed and hissed at when she came on duty.

In general, the atmosphere on Kestrel wing was friendly and the relationship between the inmates and the screws was good. If we were on association, it was possible to have a decent conversation with the officer on duty. If someone appeared to be upset, the better screws took the trouble to try to find out what was wrong. But this constructive exchange was not a consistent feature. Often, there would be no association at all, which meant that everyone was uptight and tetchy, or the screw on duty might have come from another wing, and be uninterested in the problems of the inmates.

In any prison, it is the relationship between the screws and the inmates which determines the general atmosphere, either from wing to wing, or throughout the prison as a whole. For most of my time at Bullwood this relationship was, on balance, good. We were not made to feel like a human sub-species because we were convicted criminals. The conditions alone at Bullwood were enough to finish off an inmate's morale. I think the more sympathetic screws realised this, and tried to build up our self-esteem rather than diminish it further.

Of course there were incidents when the officers were cruel and malicious towards prisoners. Sometimes inmates were hassled and picked on by one officer, who had it within her power to make that woman's life a misery. Nor could the screws stand being talked about behind their backs, as Linda, who joined us in the laundry, discovered to her cost.

Linda, was tiny, not five feet tall, with mousy straight hair and a huge nose. She didn't speak above a whisper, and was in awe of the three of us, who were becoming more boisterous each day. She was seventeen, and by the

time I met her, she had spent fifteen months in custody – a small impression on the five-year sentence she had been given for beating up an old lady.

'Granny-bashing', like child-molesting, was an offence that other inmates despised. Women's prisons do not have a segregated wing, as men's prisons do, for rapists and child sex-offenders. Rule 43, under which prisoners are segregated for their own safety, was used relatively little at Bullwood, in cases when the prisoner was at risk when mixing generally in the prison, or if the prisoner was very violent or had been convicted of beating her children. The main offence that caused a violent reaction in other inmates was the beating-up of children, and women admitted for crimes of this sort were usually put straight on to Rule 43. But any crimes against the helpless or the weak were frowned on by other inmates, sometimes provoking a violent reaction.

Linda had been in Pucklechurch Remand Centre, where much of her time was spent in solitary confinement. When she had been allowed to mix with other prisoners, her nose had been broken badly, and she had spent a week in an outside hospital, having it mended. I was intrigued to know how she went about beating someone up, being so tiny.

'I never done it,' she mumbled. 'My boyfriend done it, but 'e got away, didn't 'e?'

The same boy had raped her when she was fourteen.

Linda's parole review was due at any time, but because of her offence, she was expecting a 'total knock-back' (refusal of parole with no possibility of further reviews). Nor would she be released on her EDR, as she had lost remission for refusing to obey Direct Orders and, worse, for slashing her arms with bits of glass. Both her arms had red welts all the way up, some fresher than others. She had crutched the glass in when she had been moved from Pucklechurch. The three of us made a great effort with Linda. She told us about her life in Wales, and how

she was longing to go back, but doubted whether she could: the stigma of being an ex-con would shame her family too much.

Since being inside, Linda had become nick-bent and was carrying on a disastrous affair with Cindy, the prison flirt. She was always writing passionate letters to Cindy, who tried to collect them when she emptied her wing's dustbins. Her success depended on which screw escorted her. If it wasn't safe, Cindy stood in front of the laundry door, waving and blowing kisses. Sometimes other girls delivered notes for the lovers, such as the woman in charge of cleaning the Governor's kitchen and the administration wing, who had access to the laundry when she collected clean towels, or the prison cleaners who filled their buckets from the laundry sink. Carrying messages was a reportable offence. I often passed notes from Sheila to Trish, who were not lovers, but friends, but I was not caught; it did not occur to me not to do it. Linda was caught, however. She had written a note to Cindy accusing a particular screw of being a 'fucking bitch'. The same screw found the note and Linda was put on report.

On the same day Sheila was told that she could not bring her knitting down to the laundry. The screw inspired such anger, that Sheila threatened her with her fists. This was precisely the kind of petty tyranny that the more malevolent screws liked to inflict on the inmates. By making up a pointless rule, they were capable of depriving the prisoner of a couple of hours of harmless pleasure.

Towards the middle of February, there was a big clear-out with a number of prisoners about to leave. My friend Emma had learnt that she had got her parole, and was leaving within the week. Young Laurie's home leave was coming up. Mina was on a pre-release course, which was supposed to help prepare her for the big outside world, but she didn't find it very helpful.

In Cell Six the imminent departures depressed Sarah and myself. There was still a long time to go before it would be our turn to walk out of the gates. Meanwhile, almost every night we had to 'sing out' an inmate in the traditional Bullwood style. After we were banged up for the night, a voice would shout at about 9 p.m. 'Thelma's goin' 'ome tomorra'!', which was the cue for everyone to poke their heads through the bars and start singing.

Good luck, good 'ealth, God bless you,
And guide you on your way,
Good luck, good 'ealth, God bless you,
That's all we 'ave to say,
No matter where you wander,
No matter where you are,
Good luck, good 'ealth, God bless you
And keep you safe in our hearts.

And another:

There's a ship leaving Bullwood today,
It's taking poor Thelma away,
There stands Sharon with tears in her eyes,
There goes Thelma with legs opened wide,
Singing Thelma we love you we do,
We'll always be faithful and true
So give us a lick, instead of a prick
And we'll be faithful to you!

When a popular inmate was sung out, the songs went on for ages. Sarah and I got used to this farewell routine. There were few people whose cell window faced the factory who did not join in a sing-out.

Despite my resolutions to keep myself occupied, I became very depressed in February. I was losing confidence in myself. I had been sustained by the idea of writing a book,

but now I wondered if I would ever be able to achieve it. Every book I read made me think I was more stupid than I had previously thought. I wrote nothing for weeks and my heated desire to illustrate the workings and faults of British justice and the penal system dissolved into inert depression. I put on weight and spurned any company except Sarah's. I felt a nondescript, cowardly mess.

Even the prospect of my sister and her fiancé coming to see me failed to rouse my enthusiasm; I was beginning to regard visits as a strain. If I was not able to show my visitors that I was fine, and coping, and that the whole thing was really a bit of a laugh, they would go away feeling as depressed as I was. Perhaps none of them was deceived by my bravado, but it would have been a waste to spend the precious hour and a half in tears.

Cocooned in Cell Six, Sarah and I spent hours on the top bunk, reading to each other. We discovered the Book of Revelation, and took it in turns to read the fiery, apocalyptic verses. At the time of my depression, I turned to the chaplain for help. He was a kind and sympathetic man, although I did not prove to be fertile ground for conversion.

'Read St John and ask God to illuminate the Scriptures,' he suggested. I could only think of a flippant reply, but I tried St John all the same. It left me a bit flat, unlike Revelation, which fulfilled my taste for drama and excitement.

Sarah was opening up more, and now talked freely about her past, family and friends. Sometimes she came across as vulnerable: the insecure model who, despite her success, had no one to guide and protect her through the pitfalls of an irresponsible, jet-set life. At other times, she told me stories that put her firmly in the role of ringleader and hell-raiser. She was used to being put on a pedestal by men, and admired and looked up to by her contemporaries. It struck me that no one she ever talked about had treated her normally or straightforwardly; she

was judged on her looks alone, not on her character, and gradually it became apparent that she thought the same herself, and resented it.

Sarah and I had the same sense of humour. Tucked away in our cell, we often laughed for hours at trivial jokes that others thought pointless. Perhaps our bouts of hysteria had something to do with being cooped up and confined; laughter was a release of sorts.

One thing in particular that set us off laughing was the results of our attempts at songwriting. I was also teaching Sarah the guitar (I had been issued with one from the education department). We had put our names down for guitar classes when we arrived, but it wasn't until we had been in Cell Six for some time that we saw our names on the wing noticeboard: guitar lessons for that night.

At 5.30 p.m., those going to the education block were escorted over. There were two other girls in the guitar group, but unlike us they were starting from scratch. The teacher decided to split the class in two, so he told Sarah and me to wait outside for our turn. On the other side of the corridor there was a kitchen where the cookery classes were held and we found that it was unlocked. We wandered in and made ourselves at home. We found some tea cakes under a towel, and a jar of coffee. There were no cups in which to make the coffee, so we used an old jug.

As we sat there, with our feet up on the table, sipping coffee and munching the cakes, Miss Roberts, the education officer, stormed in. She had seen the light on and had come to turn it off, little expecting to find us behaving as if we were at a women's coffee morning. Guiltily, Sarah and I tried to hide the jug.

'What have you got there?' she asked quietly, noticing the crumbs on the plate where the cakes had been.

We put the jar on the table.

Miss Roberts went mad. We were abusing the facilities of the education block, she said. We were no better than

thieves. Was the coffee ours? No? In that case, we had no right to drink it. She marched us out into the corridor, took our names and looked at us sharply.

'I would have expected better from you two,' was all she said.

We both expected to be put on report, but we suffered no repercussions from this incident.

Perhaps it was nerves after this episode that made our guitar lesson a fiasco. The teacher, who was a small, shy man, asked us what we wanted to learn, but any ideas that we had vanished.

'How about this sort of thing?' he asked, and played a couple of bars of the type of music you hear in lifts, or in an aeroplane just before take-off.

Sarah and I started to laugh; quietly at first, and then uncontrollably, so that we couldn't speak. There was no remedy, no cure; we just sat there in painful, shoulder-shaking hysteria for half an hour. It went on for the whole lesson; we were like schoolgirls. Our poor teacher sat in front of us, looking bewildered.

Because of the unreliable nature of the education department, we had only one other guitar lesson during our time at Bullwood.

10

Soon there were other distractions. During her time on bail, Sarah had been breathalysed while driving and had been found to be over the limit. Her case was now due to come up in Thame, her local town, and she was to go to court under escort from prison. She was woken on the day by a bang on the cell door at 4.40 a.m. in order to go through Reception, then driven within yards of her home to the court, where she was fined and banned for a year. Her solicitor was there with another piece of news: the date for her appeal had been set for the following week, in London. She arrived back that night exhausted and scared. The trauma of having been so close to her home, yet unable to stop and go inside, had upset her; and the added shock of the proximity of the appeal had us both on edge. This was our real chance for release, not just a dream to be talked about.

I had a hunch that I would be hearing about my appeal soon. Until then, our cases had been dealt with in tandem. Locked in Cell Six with nothing to dilute the tension, we worked ourselves up to a frenzy of expectation.

As I had expected, Mrs Archer informed me the following day that the date of my appeal had been set for 27 February, three weeks after Sarah's, and was to be heard in the Court of Appeal by the Lord Chief Justice. Surely, I thought, that must be a good sign. She also told me that it had been requested that I should be brought to the court, but not to appear at the hearing, which struck us both as strange. 'I think it's a good sign,' she said, smiling.

Sarah and I were relieved that our appeals were being

heard separately. I had often thought that Sarah had been given a custodial sentence because of the publicity surrounding my case. She had also provided the judge with a back-up, if his sentence on me had been questioned: he could say that I wasn't the only girl he sentenced to prison that day. I prayed that Sarah would be dealt with first, without any bias or publicity. If that happened, I was sure that she had a good chance of being let out, or given a reduction in her sentence.

The possibility of one of us being released but not the other was remote, since the cases were so similar; but whatever happened, we wanted our results to be the same. Neither of us could bear the idea of leaving the other in prison on her own.

I received a letter from my parents who had heard the news: it was full of constrained hope. 'Darling . . . It's not even worth thinking about . . . ' But none of us was thinking about anything else.

Sarah and I became irritable and jumpy with nerves. The doctor prescribed Valium to calm us down. This was common practice for inmates who had an appeal or parole coming up. The more excitable ones were given Largactil, often before they were due for release, if their excitement made them aggressive. Sarah and I were not about to start fighting on the wing, but sleeping had become even more of a problem than usual. All day, apart from during work hours, we sat on the top bunk discussing what we would do if we were let out: have a drink, go somewhere sunny, wash the prison pallor from our skin.

I didn't mention my appeal to the girls in the laundry. Some of the women at Bullwood had made it clear how they felt about my lawyers' decision to appeal. 'You got a fucking cheek,' and 'How much are you paying the judge?' were some of the insults I got used to around the prison. There were women who had been waiting for six months to hear about their appeals. The fact that mine

had come through in under three months wouldn't make me any more popular with them.

One afternoon we were pushing the sheets through the rotary iron, listening to Radio One, as usual. The news came on, and I heard my name crackling over the airwaves. 'Rosie Johnston is to appeal against her nine-month sentence on the 27th of this month . . . ' Jo and Sheila danced around asking me questions. Had I known about it? Was I going to get a result (be successful in my appeal)? Was I going to court? The news went round the prison in no time and several inmates and screws informed me about it on my way back to the wing. The public announcement was the last thing I wanted. My hopes for the appeal to be heard without publicity were dashed, thereby increasing the chances of a slanted result. My hopes lay with Sarah, and the outcome of her hearing.

Two days before Sarah's appeal, our hopes and expectations crashed about us once more. Mrs Archer came in to our cell to tell us that the date of Sarah's appeal had been moved back to coincide with mine. It was also to be heard by the same judge. We had been counting on our appeals being heard separately. We thought that the prospect of two prisoners being released on the same day by the same judge was unlikely. Sarah was brave, but I was not. More and more, I felt that I was responsible for Sarah's imprisonment: I worried that, had Sarah's case been treated entirely separately from mine, she would not have been given a custodial sentence.

It was as if, although our offences were not linked in any way, we were being dealt with as if we were co-defendants. Because of the arbitrary nature of sentencing in the judicial system, it was difficult to see clearly what our chances of being released were. We had the actual facts of our offences, arrests and statements. We had both been told by the police that we would not go to prison for what we had done. We were both first offenders, and

hadn't been selling or pushing drugs. Because we felt that the media hype might have prejudiced the judge who passed our sentences, we were each to represent our pleas in mitigation to the Lord Chief Justice and ask for a reduction in our sentences.

The overwhelming disadvantage in my case was the publicity. Even after sitting through the court case and hearing the true facts for themselves, the press made no effort to report the happenings correctly. A judge is meant to be impartial, but I could never be sure that the media attention hadn't influenced him in any way at all. If there was going to be another build-up of interest in the tabloids before the appeal, there would be the same risk of prejudice.

My family and friends thought I was being brave and plucky, but underneath I felt a mixture of confusion, shame and resentment. I did not think that I had led a blameless life: far from it, I had been selfish and irresponsible, wild and lazy. My resentment was against the system. Like so many of the women I met in prison, I did not have a 'criminal' mentality, and, given precedents for similar cases, I felt that my sentence had been unfairly severe in the first place. It struck me again and again that there was simply not enough time or thought devoted to the different ways of dealing with wrongdoings.

My bouts of rabid thinking were interspersed with attacks of lethargy and apathy: none of it mattered, anyhow; I didn't matter, prison didn't matter. Lying on my bunk, puffing on a rollie, I listened to the interminable clatter of footsteps and keys, and the hissing and knocking of the pipes. These fogs of negativity were always interrupted by a persistent voice, telling me to buck up and snap out of it.

My oscillating mood, caused by the tension of the build-up to the appeal, was not helped by the general atmosphere in the prison. The inmates on our wing

were relatively stable, although there had been more outbreaks of abuse and aggressive behaviour than usual. On other wings, however, there were continual reports of women being sent down the block for assaulting officers, refusing Direct Orders, and so on. One girl had tried to hang herself. Fire alarms and screaming sirens could be heard almost every night. There was a shortage of staff and association was increasingly irregular.

I was not sure what had caused this fractious atmosphere, or whether it had just been slowly brewing up. A contributory factor might have been that, in any institutional establishment, even at school, there are times when everything becomes 'too much' – one of the noticeable similarities between my boarding school and prison was that everything always happened at once.

The latent atmosphere exploded on Kestrel over the weekend beginning on Friday 13 February. Jack, the girl who had shown me how to 'swing the shoe', was trying to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. Because she had been abusive to a screw the week before, she was 'behind the door' as the block was full. Jack's wit and humour made her popular on the wing; although she was volatile, she was kind to everyone. The rest of us on the wing made her birthday cards with whatever we could find and shoved them under her cell door. We all got together and signed a petition asking Mrs Archer whether Jack could be let out on association that night as it was her birthday, but association was cancelled and, since it had been some time since we had been let out for evening association, the women were restless.

Jack was expecting a visit from her mother the next day, and was in a state of extreme nervousness. As she had spent most of her childhood in children's homes, she felt rejected by her mother, yet at the same time desperately wanted to please her. She was obsessed by the idea of one day forming a proper mother/daughter relationship and saw the visit as a step in the right direction.

Jack's nerves made her verbose and excitable. All that day she had sat by her window, shut away from contact with others, yelling obscenities to anyone who would listen, shouting and singing her way through the day to take her mind off the approaching visit.

After the 8 p.m. bang-up, she carried on, by this time with the rest of us joining in for support. She was told several times by the screws to shut up. Everyone booed them, and shouted out that Jack should be allowed to sing, since it was her birthday. Through the din, another fight could be heard. One inmate told another who had been singing in support of Jack to pack the noise in. 'Fuck off' had been the reply, and threats of 'I'm going to kill you, you bitch, wait until I get my hands on you tomorrow' mingled with the raucous choruses of 'Happy Birthday' sung in Jack's honour. There was a highly charged atmosphere.

In the morning, it was clear that something was wrong. We were not unlocked at the usual time of 7.45 a.m. We heard the familiar noises of rattling keys and sensible shoes squeaking along the floor, but no move was made to let us out of our cells. Inmates were calling and shouting to the screws, driven frantic by the break in routine. The screws would not tell us what was going on, or answer the numerous calls and loosened flaps from the women behind the locked doors. Someone called to Jack; she wasn't there. Gradually, everyone realised that Jack had been sent down the block.

There was an outcry. We all knew that, if that were the case, she would have to see her mother under closed-visit conditions, which meant sitting in a room with two screws present listening to their conversation, ready to prevent any physical contact. It was obvious what Jack's reaction to that would be.

When I was released from prison, I made contact with Jack, after she had also been released, through Women in Prison, a pressure group dedicated to improving the conditions inside women's prisons and, eventually, to

abolishing the prisons altogether. She told me what had happened that day.

Early in the morning, Jack had heard the screws unlocking the door to Kestrel wing; she knew they had come to take her down the block. She looked through her peephole to see a frightening number of officers approaching her cell in riot gear. Her cell door was opened and they stood there, waiting for her to go with them. She asked what she was being charged with; they gave her no reply. Realising that her precious visit was in jeopardy, Jack went quietly to the block, and prepared to beg the Governor or whoever dealt with her case to let her have her visit under normal conditions.

An AG was on duty. Jack went into the office and pleaded with him to be allowed back on to the wing. Without looking up, he told her that she was being charged with inciting a riot, and was to be punished with two weeks in the punishment cells. He knew about Jack's mother's visit.

A closed visit is a meeting under scrutiny, not a real chance to talk to friends or family. Jack's mother arrived with a bunch of flowers which she was forbidden to give her daughter. They sat talking awkwardly, neither of them able to open up in the presence of boot-faced officers. Jack's mother was seeing her in the role of troublemaker, which was the very thing Jack didn't want, but didn't know how to prevent.

After her mother left, Jack's misery and rage brimmed over and she set fire to her cell with some matches she had crutched. The screws had taken everything away from her but she managed to damage the strip blanket. There was a burst of black smoke, the aggro bell went off and the fire engines were called. Jack was dragged from her cell and thrown into another one, this time with nothing in it at all. Another AG ordered her to have an internal search, to see whether she had any more matches hidden on her. As she refused, she was stripped, and left in an empty

cell without even a blanket for an entire night. When they reissued her with clothes, she was given a pair of flip-flops, which she ripped to pieces.

For this she was charged with criminal damage, and given more time in the punishment cells, as well as loss of wages. Without her knowledge, it was decided that she should be shipped back to Holloway, because of her 'unreasonable behaviour'. The day she was moved, a van was driven around to the outside entrance of the block; she was not allowed to leave through Reception. She was bundled into the van by screws in riot gear, unable to say goodbye to the friends she had made, treated like an animal, dazed and lonely after thirty-three days in solitary confinement.

Jack was not welcomed at Holloway. The authorities there did not want her because of her reputation for difficult behaviour. She was strip-searched in front of male screws, which made her feel dirty and humiliated. She did the rest of her sentence at Holloway, not without further incident, and was finally released towards the end of 1987.

When Jack told me about her ordeal, I asked her if she minded me describing it in my book. Both she and Chris Tchaikovsky of Women in Prison were determined that what had happened to Jack should be made known.

When such an incident happens in prison an inmate has no escape, no real means of protest or complaint. In Jack's case, her behaviour which led to the brutal treatment might have been avoided if someone had taken the trouble to talk to her about the visit, her worries and pent-up fears. From my own experience I knew that Jack was easy to talk to, yet apparently no one made any attempt to do so. It cannot be right to write off girls like Jack as violent and aggressive when a more humane reaction by those in authority over her would probably have been far more constructive.

* * *

After the inmates on Kestrel realised that Jack had gone, the shouting became more abusive. We had been waiting in our cells for an hour without having had breakfast or a chance to empty our stinking potties. Tempers were snapping, fists were beating against doors. From the messages being relayed through the windows, we realised that it was the same all over the prison. Bullwood had come to a standstill. Women who had served more than several months were worst affected by the breakdown in routine. They depended on the familiarity of day-to-day events; hiccups left them confused and scared. From every quarter, women were calling out to the screws: 'What's going on?' 'When are we going to be unlocked?' 'I want me breakfast . . . ' The women who were pregnant were desperate to use the wing lavatory.

We were unlocked after 9 a.m. without being told what had caused the delay. We tried to wheedle information out of the screws, but one let slip that they had been told to say nothing. The secrecy surrounding our prolonged bang-up left an air of insurrection amongst the inmates. The officers were jumpy and on the look-out for trouble. The atmosphere could not have been more tense.

The two women who had been shouting obscenities at each other the night before, during Jack's supposed riot, met face-to-face by the breakfast trolley. The lankier of the two dropped her cereal and lunged at her opponent. The screws stood passively as the two women scratched, bit and tore each other's hair out.

Our cell was opposite the breakfast trolley, with the door open, and before we knew what was happening, the fight was in full spate on the floor of our cell. Sarah and I climbed on to the top bunk to avoid the cyclone of flailing arms and legs. The burlier of the two had grabbed her adversary's head and was banging it against the floor. Her nose split, and there was blood everywhere. Only then did the screws intervene. The two women were separated by officers and onlookers who realised that things had gone

too far. The one with the bloody nose was sent to the hospital wing; the rest of us were hurriedly locked in our cells. The aggro bell wasn't rung until after they had been split up. From within our cells, we heard the tramp of screws, running in time with each other, arriving on the wing, whispering and dispersing.

Because of the late start, everything else was delayed. There was a rumour that those expecting a visitor would have time cut from the hour and a half. I was expecting my sister and her fiancé, whom I had not met – what a place to meet your future brother-in-law.

Dinner was late, but the screws hurried it along, and had us back in our cells by midday. As soon as the door was shut, I knew that I had to go to the lavatory. If there were three or more screws on duty, and the matter was urgent (for example, if you were pregnant or suffering from diarrhoea), then it was normal practice for the inmate to be allowed out to use the wing lavatory; however, there were often not enough staff on duty, or your case wasn't considered sufficiently 'urgent'. I chose the wrong day to be assailed by an attack of runny tummy.

I shouted out for the door to be unlocked, but was ignored. I released my wooden flap, shouted some more, and banged my fists on the door. My urge to go to the lavatory was becoming increasingly difficult to control. How could I be expected to open my bowels in front of Sarah? Why should she be subjected to that? I was in pain, and furious at the screws' persistent refusal to let me out. Through my peephole, I could see more than three screws on duty. Why would they not open the door? Was it sheer bloody-mindedness? Normally too scared of the consequences to let rip at the screws, my self-control crumbled and I shouted every obscenity I could think of. It was an accumulation of the morning's events together with frustration and physical discomfort that opened the sluices of my

temper. Along the wing, other women were worked up as well.

Clutching my stomach and clenching my buttocks, I continued my tirade against sadism. Sarah told me to use the potty; she said she didn't mind, it was an emergency. By then, though, I was determined that I was not going to give in to the capricious whims of the authorities. My blood was up, and I was determined that I should be let out of the cell to perform a basic human function with some dignity. An hour later there was a change of screws on the wing. Ten minutes before visiting time, I was let out. By now, the issue had begun to hurt more than my need to use the lavatory. When we were unlocked, I was only one of many who was irascible. Every inmate had an axe to grind; resentment of the system was simmering all over the prison.

11

It was impossible not to think all the time about being released. As the date for our appeal hearings drew near, Sarah and I immersed ourselves in a world of post-release plans. We tried to temper our fantasies by reminding each other that we might not get the result we hoped for, but it was never long before we were off again, to the sun, the cinema or the pub.

The process of lodging an appeal is complicated. The case has to be heard by one judge, who then decides whether the appellant has sufficient grounds to go ahead. If the judge considers that there are grounds for appeal, the case is taken to the Court of Appeal, where it is heard by three judges. Being given leave to appeal by the first judge has no bearing on the outcome of the case. Since we knew little about the ins and outs, the likelihood of our sentences being shortened or suspended appeared to us to be quite within reason. I knew my counsel thought we stood a good chance, and that was enough for me to be optimistic. Sarah's barrister felt the same. We both detected a suppressed buoyancy in our legal advisers, perhaps placed there by our imaginations. We wanted to cling on to hope, and that is what we did.

I was puzzled by the court's decision to keep me in the holding cells while the case was being heard, without letting me appear in the courtroom. I was convinced that it was because I was going to be released. Sometimes, however, we were utterly despondent. Even if I were successful with my appeal, the press would have a field day. I imagined the headlines – 'Prison girl Rosie freed

by appeal judge' – and the spurious stories about my wealth and class that would follow it. My parents, who wrote to me every day, were terrified that my built-up hopes would be disappointed. I could tell that, like me, Mum was hoping blindly. It was I who had been adamant about the appeal from the first day of my sentence: if there was a chance of being freed, then that chance must be taken. Mum and Dad had been more cautious. They could not bear the thought of further bad publicity, and the dashed hopes that the failed effort would incur. In my usual stubborn way, I refused to listen.

Mr French, the PE teacher, didn't add to my confidence. 'You're a fool to appeal against your sentence,' he said to me one morning in the gym, where we had sessions about once a week. 'Most heroin dealers get three years or more. Nine months was a result [light sentence].'

He was by no means the only one who thought that I had been dealing in drugs for money.

Sarah was jittery too. We tried to bury ourselves in our reading, and in singing and writing songs, but we both found it hard to concentrate. We were cutting ourselves off from other people. Sarah had always found it hard to mix; now I could see myself changing – as Sheila from the laundry put it, I was 'going into myself'.

My edginess caused me to have a disagreement with Mr Ship. He told me to load up the washing-machines with strip blankets that had just come in from the block. They were covered in fresh blood. I said that I could get AIDS, for all I knew, and refused to touch them.

'Probably won't,' was Mr Ship's taciturn reply.

'"Probably" isn't good enough,' I said, turning my back on the blood-splattered blankets.

Quietly, he gave me a Direct Order, which I couldn't refuse without ending up down the block myself. Reluctantly, I loaded the blankets into the machine. Sheila, Jo and Linda watched me in silence, wondering where all the blood had come from.

* * *

During this time another member of the Upper House, Lord Hilton, came to see me. A distant cousin of my mother's, he was kind and gentle. His wife had sent me the entire set of Dickens although I had met her only once, some years before.

Lord Longford came again. We were like old friends, delighted to see each other, and determined to continue our friendship on the right side of the prison walls. He said that he would take me to lunch in the House of Lords when I was released (which he did).

These visits were a valuable distraction. Both Sarah and I were now dreading the appeal. We were going to have to pack up all our property, and go through Reception as if we were going home. If we did not get a walk-out we would have to bring all our clobber back again. Mrs Archer said that she would save the cell until she found out the outcome of the appeal. She would not put any 'new bods' in there until she was certain that we were not coming back.

On the Sunday before my appeal, which was on a Friday, my parents came to visit me. Their faces were drawn with worry. When I saw how much it was affecting them, I wondered whether my singlemindedness had been worth it.

'We've told you before to take your basket off the table, Mrs Johnston,' barked a screw. Wearily Mum complied with the familiar rules. It was all so depressing. We could hardly bear to talk above a whisper. We couldn't hope for anything, but there was a chance . . .

When my parents had gone, crossing their fingers with the last wave, I went back to the cell and lay on my bunk. Neither Sarah nor I wanted to talk. I wanted the week to be over; then I willed it to go slowly, so that Friday might never arrive. We chose not to go out on association that night. Bullwood was becoming increasingly restless and claustrophobic. Maggie was down the block, Jack

was down the block and the atmosphere was one of suppressed resentment. In order to cope we preferred to remain within the confines of our cell.

Our world was becoming a fantasy of dreams and unrealistic ideals. Sarah dreamt that she had been raped by a giant bird; I read her Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan', which she had never heard before. We thought that the likeness of her dream to the poem was auspicious and symbolic, an obscure portent of things to come. Mysteries such as these kept us occupied for hours, but if we tried to explain them to anyone else, visitors or correspondents, they sounded mad, or pseudo-intellectual. We sat on the top bunk with scarves wrapped round our heads like clairvoyants, our eyes shut, humming to ourselves. When our eccentric friend, the library screw, came in to the cell one evening to find us like this, she went away shaking her head and muttering something about hippies.

The day before the appeal, several screws who worked on Kestrel wing came to wish us luck. 'I never want to see you two again' was their way of saying 'I'll keep my fingers crossed.' Neither Sarah nor I slept, despite the Valium and the temazepam. The thought of another court session made me want to demand an eleventh-hour reprieve. Sarah felt the same. Although it was a blessing of sorts not to be experiencing the fraught build-up alone, we were doing each other no good by this stage, our nerves rubbing off on each other.

We sat in the orange light by the window, breaking the monotony of the night by rolling cigarettes. We looked out on to the stark, black-windowed factory, wondering if it was the last time we would do so.

We were called at 5.30 a.m. We couldn't eat any breakfast; we just puffed on our shared rollie. Sarah was to appear before the judge, so she had the added worry of trying to make herself look like someone who should be

released from prison immediately. After much consultation, we deemed her fit and walked through the hushed wing. Something was sticking in my throat. Please God, please let this be the last time that I have to walk along this floor.

We went across the pitch-black courtyard into Reception, where we blinked and waited underneath the yellow strip lights. Our Prop. was assembled in the usual brown paper bags, our names scrawled in felt tip on the side. The van was ready and we climbed into it with our escort officers. We were cleared at the gate and the van drove out of the vacuum, along the drive, and on to the main road. I gazed at the tail lights on the cars. I had been living in the heart of suburbia for weeks without having seen a single car. We sat together looking grey and unconfident. The screws chatted and joked, offering us cigarettes and Polos.

Approaching London in the rush hour, we headed for the Law Courts in the Strand. We sat in the heavy traffic, surrounded by bored commuters, listening to the wireless.

'Today Rosie Johnston is appealing against her nine-month sentence. Her case is to be heard in the Court of Appeal by the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Lane . . . ' The bulletin went on for ages. I looked at the people in the traffic, wondering if they were listening to it and whether they cared what happened to me.

We were nearing the City, and none of us knew our way to the Strand through the complicated one-way systems.

'It's up there . . . '

'No, I think you'll find that we have to go over that bridge . . . '

Sarah and I left the navigation to the screws. After all, it was not our responsibility. We ended up going the wrong way down a one-way street. We were running out of time and Sarah and I started to panic. After much confusion,

we emerged from the labyrinthine back streets and found the right way.

It was drizzling with rain, but a motley collection of press was standing drably outside on the pavement. The van turned into the court car park, and we were bundled into the building through the back door. The Law Courts, cold and archaic, offered no comfort. We were led through a maze of stone stairways and arched doors to a recess outside the courtroom. We were joined by eight or nine male convicts who were also waiting for their appeals to be heard. Most of them looked about forty. One sat next to me and we talked. I asked him what he was appealing against.

'Twelve years for a minor burglary. Len over there got thirteen years for fraud, he's already done four. Johnny got seven years for attempted GBH when he was provoked, you know. Some of us should get something off. What about you?'

'Nine,' I mumbled, hoping that he would think I meant years. My sentence was paltry compared to theirs.

Sarah was called to the court. I sat with sweaty palms praying that she would come back with good news. We all fell silent. The waiting was intolerable. I had no watch, and there was no clock on the wall. Perhaps Sarah was never coming back; perhaps they had let her go already and they would come for me next. Hope was never more alive. Then she was back, her beautiful face saying it all: misery, disappointment, exhaustion.

'What happened?'

'Nothing, not even a couple of months suspended.'

We sat slumped on the bench, as we had on the day we first met. Then we didn't know what we faced; now, we knew what we had to go back to. Sarah was trying to tell me about the hearing, but her voice was odd and distant. Both our families had been there, she said, and friends had come along to show their support.

'That's nice,' I said, tears pouring down my face.

It was only then, with the realisation that we had to do another three months, that we knew how much we had counted on getting a walk-out. We were going back to Bullwood. There would be those who would be glad to see us back and would sneer at our failed attempt at freedom; others would be genuinely sympathetic.

We were taken to a cell where we sat in silence until our visits with our families and lawyers. I saw my legal men first. They were numb with disappointment. John and Trish Simms were distraught. I hugged them and thanked them for everything. The matter was closed, there was nothing anyone could do.

I was so tired that I could only thank them for their immense kindness. Then it was time to see my family, through the dreaded glass again. My dear sisters tried to look on the bright side.

'The judge was very nice about you,' they yelled through the thick window.

But not nice enough to let me out.

'You're very brave,' Mum shouted.

I didn't want to have to be brave. I wanted to go home with them, not see them walk away. I loved them so much and I wanted to be with them, shouting my euphoria from the windows of the car as we sped out of London towards home. A screw came in to tell me that my time was up. Biting my lip, I waved goodbye to their scrunched-up faces and returned to the cell.

Sarah and I sat with our arms around each other. I started to cry, and this time I could not stop. Sarah comforted me, although she was going through the same torment.

Time passed and we carried on waiting. All we wanted was to get the return journey to Bullwood over and done with. Already, shades of the wait for the Holloway van on that first day were being repeated. This was worse. Maybe it was because I was so tired. I sobbed until the van was ready to take us back and I sobbed all the way

to Bullwood, except for a brief period when I dropped off to sleep.

Bullwood was prepared for our return, as they had heard the news on the wireless. The reception officers were quiet, almost sympathetic, and we were back on the wing without the usual rigmarole. My crying continued, Sarah brooded in silence. Mrs Archer heard the noise and came into the cell.

'I don't think it's a good idea for you two to be together tonight,' she said. 'Would one of you like to go on to the hospital wing?'

Sarah said that she would prefer to stay. I didn't care where I was. Mrs Archer took me to the hospital wing where I was shown to a single cell like my last one, except that the top half of the door was open, like a stable. I lay on the bed, still crying.

The door opened, and someone sat on the chair beside my bed. It was the Governor. She was passing through the hospital wing on a routine inspection and had heard me crying. I was almost incoherent, but I sat up on the bed. At first, I didn't want to talk, then I realised that I did want to, very much. She sat with me for three-quarters of an hour while I poured out my bitterness and misery. She listened patiently, then told me how she wished to see Bullwood improved, and about her plans for a rebuilding scheme that would see running water in every cell. She was saddened by the degrading conditions and the behaviour which they led to.

I didn't think it odd to be sitting in a cell chatting to the Governor of the establishment that I loathed. She was a sympathetic lady with a genuine conscience, hoping to do something to improve the lot of the inmates at Bullwood. She did not have the same authoritarian manner as some of her staff. Whether she made it common practice to sit with inmates and let them ramble on indefinitely I do not know, but she was liked by the inmates, as far as any governor of a prison could be.

I told her that I was worried about Sarah, whose reticence prevented her from letting things out the way I did: just because she didn't make a noise, it didn't mean that she suffered less. The Governor promised to send someone to see her. I was then given a sleeping draught and an orange. Soon I was asleep, weakened by the hectic day and too exhausted to dream.

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I returned to Cell Six the next day, where I found Sarah full of resolve.

'We've got to do it,' she said adamantly. 'We've got another three months, so it's no use cracking up now.'

She was right: there was nothing to be gained from moping. Our welcome back from the other Kestrel women had been tepid. Most of them were new, from Holloway, and were older than the girls they had replaced. Sarah and I barely left the cell. We decided to hot up our old routine of reading and writing; we set poems to music, wrote down our dreams and kept illicit diaries of our everyday life.

After the initial disappointment of appeal, it became easier to be positive. The great climactic event was over, there was no more speculation or nerve-racking build-up. Embedding ourselves in Cell Six for hours of silent pursuits was strange for both of us. Neither Sarah nor I had ever been quiet types on the outside, yet we settled into a reclusive lifestyle and survived in that priest hole without a cross word. We accepted that we needed each other, and did nothing to put our friendship in jeopardy.

In the evenings, we tried to liven things up so as not to brood on the activities of the outside world. We would settle ourselves on the top bunk (which was Sarah's now, as we had swapped after the appeal) for a night of gambling. Because of the fortnightly pay rise we were given in the laundry, my wages had rocketed to £2.40 per week, which meant I could afford a sweet

feast every Wednesday night. It was also enough money to buy extra stamps, so I was able to write about four letters a week, instead of one. I wrote to Dad telling him about my regular wages; I could just see myself in years to come with children aged twenty-three, saying, 'Well, I survived on £2.40 a week at your age, you know . . . '

Life in the laundry carried on in the same old way: pleading with Mr Ship for chocolate biscuits, and reading whenever there was a slack in the work. I was engrossed in a book called Aubrey's *Brief Lives* which was making me giggle aloud. Jo asked me what it was.

'It's just that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, landlords used to put the ground-up bones of dead men in the beer because they thought they made it stronger,' I explained.

'Well, ta very much, but I think I'll be sticking to ice and a slice,' said Jo.

Later, she was called to the AG's office. She came back looking crest-fallen.

'Didn't get me parole, did I?'

Poor Jo. She had another year to do, away from her son. She made me laugh. She told me the story of her arrest. The police had been watching her for some time before they burst into her flat. They found her with ten grams of heroin, although they had been convinced that there would be more. In fact, Jo had been tipped off that they were about to swoop, and had stuffed a large quantity up her backside. During her arrest, she was completely stoned and unable to make a statement. The police kept her in custody for the night, so that she would be in a fit state in the morning. When they came for her the next day, she had taken a large amount of the heroin she had hidden, and was in a worse state than she had been in the night before. It was a typical Jo story. She could make anything sound funny, however disturbing or unpleasant the reality.

The next day, quiet, withdrawn Linda announced that

she had been granted her parole and was going home within two weeks. Once she had got over the joy of realising that she would be free so soon, she admitted that she was terrified of facing the outside world. She wanted her freedom, but after two years in custody, a fortnight was not long enough to prepare her for the real world. She was to go back to Wales, a prospect which unnerved her. Her family had suffered because of the shame Linda had brought upon them, and she did not know whether they would be pleased to see her.

Linda was hit by an attack of 'gate fever'. Practically all the women I knew who were coming to the end of their sentences went down with it, however long or short their time inside. On a longish sentence, the symptoms of gate fever usually started about four weeks before the date of release. For some, it was just a build-up of excitement about getting out in the open. More often, it took the form of acute apprehension about crossing the threshold to freedom. Will everything work out? Can I stay on the rails? Will I get caught again? However diverse the anxieties, they all pointed to the same concern, survival.

An inmate two cells away from ours became so tense that she flared up all the time, hitting out and screaming at those who annoyed her, and was put on Largactil, a tranquilliser that was reported to turn its taker into a virtual zombie and to rot the brain. Most women just brooded about what awaited them on the outside. Those who were scared of society were protected by the autonomous world of prison. For them, an environment where the extent of responsibility was protecting your tobacco ration did not provide solutions to the problems of coping with the pressures of normal life. For others, the excitement of returning to civvy street was combined with the fear of how to avoid the cracks in the pavement. I could understand why these women experienced gate fever, but never imagined

that I would feel the same way when my turn came to check out.

One afternoon I was working in the laundry when the AG asked to speak to me. He was young and liked to consider himself popular with the inmates but thought nothing of sending women to the block when he took an adjudication.

Once again experiencing stomach-churning guilt – 'what have I done?' – I followed him into a corner. In his silky smooth voice he told me that there was a chance for me to go to an open prison.

I was stunned. The AG at Holloway had crushed that hope at the beginning of my sentence.

He asked me if I was interested, to which I replied that I would not go anywhere without Sarah. He said that she was being given the option as well.

It is difficult to describe how elated I was at the thought of going to an open prison. Short of being free, I thought it was the best thing that could happen. At least I would be away from Bullwood and its hateful squalor, its history of suffering and tragedy. No more slopping out, no more Maggie, no more fights about potties. I could hardly wait to see Sarah to share our excitement.

Back on the wing, Mrs Archer had already been informed that we would be moving.

'It's a beautiful place,' she said. 'You'll love it there.' I wouldn't have gone so far as to say that, but I knew what she meant.

We were going to East Sutton Park, near Maidstone, in Kent, as soon as they had a vacancy. The reason for our move was never explained to us, but it was common for women to be moved from a closed prison to an open one if they were not troublemakers or violent prisoners. Sarah and I had been well behaved and were not likely to do a 'runner'. There was supposed to be a system of careful selection for open prisons, but by the time I

reached East Sutton Park the procedure for choosing its inmates had gone haywire. The only stricture they kept to with absolute rigidity was that no one convicted of an arson offence would be transferred there: East Sutton Park was a beautiful rambling Tudor mansion, and would burn to the ground in six minutes in the event of fire.

Sarah and I knew a girl called Moira who had run away from East Sutton Park. When the police caught up with her, she ended up in Bullwood. She told us that the prison building was beautiful, set in acres of rolling green parkland. We would be allowed to walk to an outside church on Sundays and work outside in the fresh air. It sounded like a holiday camp and we were itching to get there. I could not understand why Moira had done a runner. ''Cos it's a shit hole,' she said. 'Believe me, you'll hate that place worse than 'ere after a week.' I dismissed that.

There was a snag, however. There were no single or double cells at East Sutton Park, just dormitories of three, four or more. Would we be in the same dormitory? We decided to worry about that when we got there. Instead, we conjured up pictures of ourselves roaming about the countryside and sneaking off to the pub for a drink on Saturday nights.

That night, Sarah and I were both in a good mood and decided to use the face packs we had bought with our private spends. We put on our dressing gowns, shoved our hair into bath caps, and smeared the pink goo on to our faces. We lay on our beds in silence as the masks hardened like plaster of Paris, pulling our skin until it was taut.

The cell door opened and Mrs Archer came in, jangling her keys.

'The AG wants to see you about your move to East Sutton Park.'

Hardly moving my mouth, I said that we would be ready in a jiffy, as soon as we had washed our faces.

'I'm afraid he wants to see you now,' was her reply.

We followed Mrs Archer into the corridor, like phantoms from the Peking Opera. Sarah's mouth was stuck in the shape of a letterbox. I could feel the giggles starting as I walked through the door into the AG's office. This AG was older than the others and humourless. He looked at the air above our heads when he spoke, ignoring our snorts of laughter. We sat there, our face packs flaking and peeling as we struggled to control ourselves. The conversation was serious, which made it worse. The graver he looked, the funnier we thought it was. Mrs Archer stood behind him, shaking her head at us, but there was nothing we could do. Eventually, he couldn't ignore us any longer, since we were making so much noise he could hardly hear what he was saying.

'What is the matter with you two? What on earth are you laughing at?' He regarded us suspiciously, as if we must be mad to find something funny.

I tried to explain that it was only because we thought it so silly to be sitting there in flowery dressing gowns with pink concrete on our faces.

He clearly thought that we were idiotic.

The purpose of the talk was to tell us that Sarah was being shipped out of Bullwood to East Sutton Park in two days and that I was to follow as soon as there was a bed free.

'I am duty bound to tell you both that if the press find out where you are, arrangements will be made for your immediate removal to a closed prison. There is no security around the grounds of East Sutton Park, and it is vulnerable to the presence of unwanted visitors. If the press start to make a nuisance of themselves, you will have to go.'

My suppressed laughter faded away. The press had succeeded in keeping up with me so far, and there was no reason to suppose that their interest in this move would be any different. If they hassled the authorities

at East Sutton Park, Sarah and I might be separated. Nothing was straightforward.

Back in the cell, I cleaned my face. Under the party pink, I looked grey.

'Cheer up,' said Sarah. 'Even if you're sent back to a closed nick at least you will have been out of this dump for a day.' She was right. We were more worried about the fact that we'd be going separately. What if there wasn't another vacancy for weeks? I might be stuck in Bullwood on my own for the rest of my sentence. I did not have much faith in the efficiency of the prison department, and thought it quite possible that Sarah and I might be separated for good.

During our last few days at Bullwood, two students from London University came into the prison to organise drama activities. They were clean-cut, well-dressed and impeccably mannered, but I resented their presence on the wing. Through the naïvety of their discussion, it became clear that they were amazed at how 'civilised' we women convicts were. I imagined them thinking that female prisoners were all like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, with long hair and dirty fingernails. To my horror, they made me feel ashamed. Here were two teenagers, looking at me with sympathy and confusion, considering themselves superior citizens in our society purely because they could walk out of the door at the end of the hall.

Sarah tried to do yoga to pass the time before her transfer. She put on a vest and leggings, tied her hair up and painted her face with our cheap lipstick. It was intriguing to watch her while she concentrated hard and became lost in the sound of her humming. Closing her eyes and sitting in the lotus position, she closed off from me and our cell world. I ruined it by blowing my nose very loudly.

The day came when Sarah was due to go to East Sutton

Park. She had packed up and gone through Reception the day before, leaving her empty pinboard and vacated bunk to remind me of her departure. We looked on her arrival at East Sutton Park as a reconnaissance trip, a chance to case the joint before I got there. We didn't discuss the possibility of my not turning up at all. Early in the morning, Sarah was called for her strip-search in Reception. We clung together before she left. I cried, Sarah told me to cheer up. The cell door banged shut, and I was left alone, without any idea of when I would see my friend again.

Cell Six did not exist any more in the way it had when Sarah and I were in it together. I sat on the top bunk on my own, realising how much Sarah and I had grown in to each other. I couldn't make myself laugh, or play backgammon, or rise above the pettiness of prison life without Sarah to encourage and help me. At least she had left me her supply of tobacco, so I could drown my sorrows in a cloud of smoke.

Without Sarah, I had virtually no one to talk to. All the young, jolly YCs had left, and I had no rapport with the older women who took their place. Mercifully, Maggie had gone to another wing.

In the laundry, Jo and Sheila soon got fed up with my long face and lack of enthusiasm. I refused to join in any of their antics, and spent most of the day moping. They lost their tempers with me.

'Just 'cos you lost yer appeal, it ain't the end of the world, is it? Think of others worse off than yerself. We got ages before our EDR.'

It made no difference, I was sinking fast. I had asked Mrs Archer to put me in a single cell, as the prospect of someone else sleeping in Sarah's bed was unthinkable. The day after Sarah went, I packed my things in my pillowcase and went back up to the upper level.

'I don't know why you're bothering to do this,' Mrs Archer said as she locked the door. 'You're off the day after tomorrow.'

Water to the withered plant. I was jubilant. I wondered if Sarah knew or if it would be a surprise when I turned up. The joy of knowing that my strangled world of closed prison was over made my last night in Bullwood by far the most tolerable. Being somewhere aesthetically pleasing would make visiting less upsetting for Mum and Dad. I went through the familiar process of property checks and cell-cleaning, counting the hours before I would leave Bullwood behind me.

On the morning of 12 March, I was called at 5.30 a.m. This time when the screws said goodbye, they knew it was for certain. I crept out of Kestrel wing without a moment's regret. The physical conditions at Bullwood had sapped much of my ability to stay cheerful. I had lost interest in my fellow prisoners, myself and the system. Without the will to make the most of my time, Bullwood offered only futility and degradation.

3

EAST SUTTON PARK

13

The screw escorting me to East Sutton Park was known as Radar because of her ability to spot an inmate who was up to something. I was expecting the prison van and wasn't looking forward to rattling around in it on my own, but instead a taxi drew up.

'How much does this cost then?' I asked Radar, surprised that there should be a taxi from Essex to Kent just for me.

She mumbled something about an arrangement with the taxi firm; but even so, it can't have cost much less than £30.

We didn't talk much on the journey and I stared out of the window, sucking a lollipop I had bought from the canteen. The countryside was beautiful compared to the dreary environs of Bullwood Hall: narrow lanes with thick hedges ran like furrows through the fields, oast-houses hid behind legions of curling hops.

The taxi turned into a drive lined with trees, their branches straining with new spring buds. It was odd to think that this was a prison: it was like being driven to the door of an imposing manor house where a butler would take my luggage. To the right, an unassuming fence separated the grounds from the fields beyond, glinting through the trees was the silver water of a lake as calm and flat as a beaten coin. The pleasing view was marred by discordant reminders of where we were: HM Prison and Youth Custody Centre, East Sutton Park. Visitors were reminded of the consequences they faced if they tried to smuggle in forbidden goods, or to help a prisoner abscond

– the Home Office word for escaping. Technically, it was impossible to escape, as there was nothing preventing an inmate from leaving.

The taxi stopped outside the rambling mansion. Through the airy windows of the main L-shaped building, I could see hundreds of faces pressed to the glass, like women in a workhouse, watching me as I collected my bags from the boot – it could have been a scene from Dickens.

The splendour of the manor and its park sang of forgotten glory. I could imagine a ramrod-straight colonel with a handlebar moustache accepting a cheque from the Home Office.

An officer opened the front door. Inside I found myself in a panelled hall, with a gaping Ingatestone fireplace. A number of screws sat round the blazing fire, sipping cups of tea. Laden with brown cardboard boxes containing my Prop, I staggered into the hall followed by Radar. She informed the screws that I was the new admission.

'Well, she can't have all that here,' snapped an older screw, waving at my Prop. 'There isn't room. Heaven knows where all that came from.' She stood up, huffing and puffing. Motioning for me to follow her, she stormed off. 'This lot will take us hours,' she complained, looking at her watch.

By then, I was familiar with the neuroses of the prison staff. Stacks of property cards which have to be checked and re-checked was one of them. Trudging along behind her, I was assailed by two arms flung around me. It was Sarah.

'Thank God,' she gabbled. 'I'm so glad to see you. This place is terrible.'

I looked at her. She was wearing brown dungarees, a cap and a green jumper. My shock at seeing Sarah dressed like that delayed my overjoyed reaction at seeing her.

She saw my face and laughed. 'You'll soon be dressed like this, it's the work uniform. I think I've swung it so that we can be in the same dorm.' She was whispering

now. 'I heard you were coming yesterday, one of the screws told me. Another woman in my room has just left, so there is a spare bed. They're real bitches, the screws. It's not at all like we imagined. It's strict and petty, and we won't be going to the pub.'

The officer was already in Reception, and was shouting for me. Sarah rushed off, and left me to begin the eternal process of going through my Prop. It reminded me of the beginning of term at school, when we had to have our clothes checked. It was the same now, waiting in terror for the objects that I had lost or broken to be missed. The boxes were all opened, and their contents spilled out on to the tables. I could not find a pad that someone had sent me.

'Your number is D29510, isn't it? Well, it says here that on the fourth of February, someone sent you a pad which you were not allowed to have in your possession. Where is it now?'

By midday, we were only halfway through. She told me to return after lunch. In the corridor outside Reception, there was a hatch from which the food was served, cafeteria-style. The dining room used to be a banqueting hall, and remnants of its past splendour remained in the form of cracked panels and chipped ceilings. There was a fireplace with an ancient family crest carved into the wood of the mantelpiece. For a second, the hall was full of rowdy cavaliers, quaffing wine from silver goblets, throwing chicken bones over their shoulders. The image was fractured by a group of rowdy convicts, downing tea from plastic mugs. Still, looking through a window with no bars and walking through a door without having to wait for someone to unlock it were luxuries I had almost forgotten.

As at Bullwood, the tables were arranged in two rows down the length of the room, each seating four inmates. Once you sat at a table, it was your allotted place at every meal unless you put in a Governor's App. to

change places. Sarah appeared. Her table was full, so I could not sit with her. Instead, she showed me to a table where someone from her dormitory sat. She was called Kate. Blonde and rather simple, she had the manner of a thirteen-year-old. She confirmed that I was to be in the same dormitory as her and Sarah. My joy and relief at being united once more with my friend restored my faith in East Sutton Park. The fact that there were to be nine of us sharing the room did not affect my elation at the time.

Also at my table were Liz and Diane, two housewives in their thirties who looked as if they would be shocked by a queue-barger, let alone commit a crime themselves. I wondered what they had done.

The system for collecting our food from the hatch was a lengthy one. There were approximately twenty tables in the hall, supervised by three screws, one taking a roll check to see that we were all present. Each table had a number which was called out in turn. Every day, the first table that was called changed, so that if you were on the first table one day, you would be on the last the next. Those on 'first table' had to pay for the privilege of being first to the hatch by cleaning up after tea and supper.

At the end of the dining room was a small divided staircase. To get our food, we had to walk through the dining room, up the stairs, out of the door and along a stone-flagged corridor to the hatch, where we took what was on offer and returned to our tables through a side door. It was a one-way system which prevented chaos at the hatch, particularly important if there was a fire.

Liz and Diane talked obsessively about the number of calories in a bowl of rice pudding. Kate asked me innumerable questions which I did not want to answer. Like Stacey, she thought of me as a bit of a celebrity, although she did not have Stacey's light touch. She was persistent and irritating. She said she would show me round, she would answer any questions I might have.

After lunch there was a break, during which I managed to escape from Kate and talk to Sarah. She took me up to see the dormitory. I was still marvelling at the ease with which we could move around. The room was enormous. Nine beds were arranged in regimental order, each with a small cupboard and a locker. Despite the size of the room, the beds were close together, and there was little space allotted to each one. There were two huge windows reaching nearly all the way from the ceiling to the floor. Light drenched the room, lighting up the wooden floor unmarked by the shadow of bars.

The room, or 'First Front' as it was called, was on the corner of the house. On the left, we had a view of the prison drive and anyone entering or leaving the grounds. The other window looked out over grassy banks at the back of the house, and the Governor's lawn. Far from being able to stroll around the park, we were allowed to walk and sit only on the small patch of grass in front of the Governor's Office as it was within the view of an officer. Women who worked in the gardens were permanently under supervision from a screw.

I was put in the bed next to the door; Sarah was one away from me. She sat on her bed. 'Oh Rosie, it's awful here. I know it's just another nick, but you would have thought it could have been a bit better. It looks great, but we're still prisoners.' Sarah was also angry because her boyfriend Ron had written to her describing how laid back life was at the open prison he was in. He didn't have to adhere to a thousand petty rules like the inmates of East Sutton Park.

She told me about the other women we were sharing with. 'Kate's a bit wet. I think everyone else suspects her of being a sneak. She and Bernadette, who sleeps there' – pointing to the bed next to mine – 'are in the middle of an argument about sex. Bernadette is the fat one, by the way. Then there's Kelly. She's very proud

of the fact that she's a professional shoplifter. The others are OK, but it's bloody noisy at night.'

Returning to Reception, Sarah led the way along a creaky passage. We passed a queue of women on a landing, above the back staircase. 'They're waiting for their letters,' Sarah explained. 'Their names are written up on a board at breaktime, and the letters are given out by a screw after lunch.'

All around me, dungaree-clad inmates were milling about, making the most of their free time before the bell went calling them back to their duties. The lunch break lasted until 1.15 p.m., after which everyone went back to work until tea, which was at 4.30 p.m.

As we'd heard, smoking was restricted, as it was seen to be a fire risk, which put paid to the laggardly hours puffing away on the bunk bed at Bullwood. Anyone caught smoking at undesignated times risked losing twenty-eight days remission and being shipped out to another prison. If evidence of smoking was found in a dormitory, then everyone who slept in it would lose remission. Committed smokers were not deterred by the rules. The loos were awash with butts every night, and women hid secret lighters and matches which they used for their cigarettes after lights-out. Smoking after the evening roll check was made easier by the fact that there were only two screws on duty for the entire prison throughout the night. They checked each dormitory hourly, and as soon as they moved on, there was at least a quarter of an hour which was guaranteed to be safe, while they continued their rounds.

Back in Reception, we waded through the rest of my Prop. Mrs Bell, the screw, handed me a copy of the smoking rules to sign. 'Make sure you understand them,' she said. 'We can't afford to take any risks in a building that is such a potential fire hazard. If you are unsure of anything, please ask an officer. Next week you will be going on the prison induction course. This

takes two days and you will be told everything you need to know about the prison. You will also meet the chaplain, the probation officer and the heads of the education department. Tomorrow you will be put on work duty cleaning the house. All new admissions do this. An officer will show you the fire drill. Please arrange with your visitors to have your excess property removed from the prison. Your paperback books are now the property of the prison department, and we will deal with them as we see fit.

'You have a "house mother", who is called Mrs Walsh. When she comes back from her holiday, she will be happy to help you with any problems that you might have. You must remember that in the absence of a punishment block, any reportable offences are punishable by the loss of remission, loss of wages or removal to another prison.'

I thought she would never stop. Outside, Sarah was waiting for me in the corridor.

'What on earth is a house mother?' I asked.

'It's left over from the borstal days. There are women in here in their fifties and sixties who have to put up with the humiliation of having a trainee officer less than half their age as their house mother. You're meant to go to them with your problems or something – it's a bloody insult.' The idea of having a house mother made us squirm. Perhaps if they had called it something else, without using the word 'mother', the idea would not have been so offensive. I was also wondering about what Mrs Bell had meant about my books and resolved not to let them be taken away from me. (I later won custody of them and had them sent out on a visit.)

Each inmate was issued with a key attached to a piece of wool, for their individual lockers (the level of thieving amongst inmates was high) and a plastic knife, fork and spoon. Any loss resulted in a 15p fine per article. These rules, coming thick and furious, worried me. Knowing how scatty I was, I wondered if I would ever be able

to remember and stick to them. I noticed that most of the inmates were carrying 'dolly bags', which were used for holding knives, forks, tobacco, knitting and anything else. Already I was worrying about where I had put my spoon.

After tea, which marked the end of the working day, I was sent to see the AG, Mrs Hughes. She sat in a dark, airless office, her face hidden by a pair of tinted spectacles. Immaculately dressed, with short black hair, she exuded tough self-confidence. She started by saying that she did not like taking girls who were convicted of drug offences. 'Drugs do find their way into East Sutton Park,' she said, 'and I can assure you that you will be offered some before long. I think it would be sensible if you came and told me who was in possession of what.'

She must have had a low estimation of my intelligence. There were aspects of serving a prison sentence which were muddling and dispiriting, but the one thing I was clear about was that grassing up on other inmates was a convict's death warrant. Generally, the screws at Bullwood had had the sense to know that repercussions on grasses caused more trouble than the information was worth. I told Mrs Hughes that I would not be telling her anything.

Supper at 7.00 p.m. consisted of a piece of shortbread and another roll check. The lighter was issued after supper until 9.00 p.m., by which time we had to be ready for bed in our dormitories. There was one room upstairs in which we were allowed to smoke, called the BBC room. It was favoured by the black girls who sat chattering and knitting, while the television blared out the programmes on BBC 1 and 2. Televisions in the other rooms showed the other channels. It was a safe way of ensuring that fights didn't break out over channel preference.

Sarah and I preferred the BBC room. It was smaller than the others, and somehow cosier. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, and the noise of the television

drowned out by constant talking, but it was near the dormitory for when the bell went at 8.45 p.m. We sat together in the hubbub, the privacy of Cell Six a distant luxury. We were both in low spirits. So far, none of our optimism at moving to an open prison had been well founded. We tried to pull ourselves together by remembering that at least we could walk to the lavatory. An officer came to show me the fire drill. Starting in First Front, we moved to the quickest escape route, which was the highly polished wooden front staircase. Another route, winding along a corridor, took us to the back stairs, also made of wood. We were, if possible, to make our way to the front door, which was not to be used by inmates at any other time. Then we were to walk slowly to the gym. No running, as that caused panic.

'But what if the whole of the first floor is on fire?' I asked.

'The chances of that are nil,' she replied confidently. 'But if this unlikely event were to occur, you should tie your sheets together, smash a window, and lower yourself to the ground.' Her certainty that there would be no fire on the first floor was either false, or stupid. I had only been in the prison for a few minutes before I found out what the procedures were for smoking illegally after lights-out. Inmates had been caught with lighters and matches in the past. Surely that was enough evidence to confirm that such a fire was not out of the question?

When I saw Bernadette, the fat girl on the bed next to mine, I wondered how she would manage to squeeze her bulk through the window. Swinging from sheets tied to rickety bedsteads was far from Bernadette's thoughts, though. She lay on her bed, a mound of cherry pink in her Terylene tracksuit, studying her nails and pouting. Her platinum-blonde hair was piled up on her head, complementing the dark mole above her lip.

''Ello love,' she said to me. 'Come to join in the fun, 'ave we?'

Kate bounded in and went to her bed.

'Look what the cat's dragged in,' drawled Bernadette. 'You going to apologise then?'

Kate went red and ignored her.

'I said, you going to apologise?' The room went quiet. Bernadette turned to me. 'That one's a right twerp. She thinks she's going to marry her boyfriend, even though he's a cripple and won't never be able to 'ave sex with her. I reckon she's mad. I told 'er, you'll soon get bored, and what do I get? An earful, that's what. What's more, she ain't made 'erself too popular with our black friends in the prison, 'ave you sweetheart? She told them she'd got this big black fella waitin' for 'er on the outside, when 'e 'appens to be as white as my arse, don't he, love?'

All the while Kate sat on her bed, looking miserable. Bernadette looked at me as if she expected an answer but I didn't want to get involved in an argument. I went and sat on Sarah's bed, not talking. Anything we said could be overheard by our dorm-mates.

Opposite Bernadette was Mable, a lady in her forties.

Kelly was the dormitory big mouth. She was serving her fourth sentence for shoplifting, and prided herself on the fact that she knew more about Holloway than the rest of us. 'I was there before they rebuilt it, hen, and let me tell you, it wasn't fit for rats.' She was Scottish and boasted again and again about how good she was at her profession.

I wanted to say that if she had been that good, surely she wouldn't have been convicted four times, but thought better of it.

'Where do you live, hen?' she asked me.

'Oxford,' I replied.

'Oh, I know Oxford, I used to work there.'

I asked her where, thinking of all the cafés, restaurants and shops where she might have been employed.

'All the shops, hen,' she said.

Working, I discovered, did not mean the same inside

prison as it did outside. Kelly was a grandmother, and like Bernadette, owned a florist's shop. They spent hours comparing the prices of their 'Gainsborough baskets' and the cerise-pink of Bernadette's favourite chrysanthemums.

The two abrasive strip lights that lit the room were switched off at 11 p.m. After lights-out, the voices continued. Gossip was bandied about, arguments resumed. Every hour, two screws came into the dormitory, grazing each bed with their torchlight to make sure that we were still there.

Kelly snored like a dying walrus. My nerves were beginning to go. Already I was forgetting about the frustrations and fights of life at Bullwood, and was longing for the anodyne tranquillity of Cell Six. Every hour, the screws came to find me wide awake. At intervals, I could hear other footsteps on the creaking floorboards – inmates sneaking off to the lavatories for a quick smoke, timing their venture so that no screws would be around. When I went to the loo, it stank of marijuana. I heard someone coming and fled back to the dorm – if it was a screw, they might have thought that I was responsible for the smell. I never thought I'd see the day when I thought of a good word to say about potties. Degrading and filthy though they were, at least one could use them in peace.

Much of my reaction against East Sutton Park was, I think, caused by the actual process of moving prisons, which is a lengthy, tiring and unsettling procedure. The other major factor contributing to my disenchantment was my idiotic and unrealistic hopes: had I controlled my fantasies about roaming the grounds and going to the pub, perhaps I would not have been so unhappy that first night. One thing I am sure of, however, is that leaving the enclosed world of a cell and being thrust into the hurly-burly of dormitory life, where nothing you do or say can be private, is a considerable shock.

* * *

In the early hours of the morning I was woken abruptly by the clanging of an old bell somewhere in the building. I thought that it was a fire. Terrified, I sat up in bed, waiting for instructions. Around me, my dorm-mates slept soundly, apart from a woman called Mabel, who was dressed in her kitchen uniform, ready for the early shift.

'What's going on?' I whispered.

'That's just the first bell, love,' she explained. 'I'm going to be late as it is. Just get up when everyone else does, and follow them down to the book. You have to sign it before 7.20; it's just the same as a roll check, really.' The other women started to get up. We had to be dressed and have our beds made before we went downstairs. By 7.15 a.m., the dorm was cleared, and we were all on our way to the book. From all over the prison came the sound of feet on wooden floorboards. We filed past the table on which the book was kept, each writing our names while two screws watched each signature, making sure that it matched up with the inmate who signed it. At 7.20 a.m., the screws looked at their watches. There were always women who didn't make it down in time. Latecomers were met with a stern ticking-off or, depending on how many times that particular inmate had been late, a 'white paper', which meant going on report. The white paper had the inmate's offence written down on it, and was presented to whoever took the adjudication.

We congregated in the record room until 7.30 a.m., when the breakfast bell went. The television was always on, showing Popeye cartoons through a cloud of cigarette smoke. All but a few of the inmates were dressed in the work clothes that Sarah had been wearing when she greeted me. I had been told that I would be issued with my uniform when I changed jobs from the house-cleaning that I had to start with.

The prison ran on the assumption that every inmate worked. We were put into groups, Labour One, Two and Three, according to physical fitness. To be in Labour

Three the inmate had to be virtually a stretcher case, but there were women with back problems and so on who were Labour Two; their jobs were less demanding. The majority of the inmates at ESP were Labour One, and were assigned any of the manual jobs available. The most likely prospect was a transfer to the gardens, where most of the jobs were. Sarah and I didn't know much about any of the work; we just hoped that we would be together.

My first task was to clean the stone 'flats' in the corridor outside the dining room. Sarah was cleaning a room called 'the Butler's', where we washed our knives and forks after each meal and kept our mugs. The screw in charge of the house-cleaners, Miss Bight, who had a brace on her teeth and long brown hair, bobbed around looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. As soon as she heard Sarah and me talking, she ordered us not to. Whenever she disappeared around a corner, we would start again. Every time, she slithered back to catch us in mid-flow. Her shoes made no sound on the floor. Sarah had told me how unpopular the screws were at ESP, and it was easy to see why. Miss Bight was a trainee officer, younger than I was, and desperate for promotion. Many of the younger screws, in their zeal to win favour with their superiors, made life impossible for the inmates. Constant fault-finding, interrogation and misplaced suspicion made them loathed by the inmates in the prison.

At 10 a.m., there was a fifteen-minute cigarette break (we started work at 8.15 a.m.), when anyone working in the house or gardens came to the dining room; it was also another roll call. The lighter could not be issued until the check had been completed. This was frustrating for those who were longing for their nicotine intake. Coercing everyone to sit down and be counted took ages. Once the check was done, inmates swarmed around the two prison-issue lighters, passing lighted roll-ups to their friends. Those with their own

lighters waited until no one was looking, and then lit up in a corner. By this time, the letter list had gone up. Shouts of 'You got a letter Denise,' and 'Bad luck, love, he still ain't written,' rang out through the dining hall. I sat quietly at my table, trying to take in the noise and hubbub of my surroundings. The swarming mêlée of dungareed inmates had all the hassle and jabber of a foreign market. I knew the feelings of claustrophobia when one is surrounded by people jostling and shouting; only here I was stuck.

Sarah came and disturbed my thoughts by telling me that I had a letter. One of the privileges of an open prison was that our letters were not censored, or so we were told. During my time at ESP I knew a girl who had one of her letters opened. She must have written something very stupid, as she was shipped out of prison on the same day.

After the cigarette break, it was back to cleaning until lunchtime. The jobs we were given took us ten minutes at the most. The conscientious Miss Bight checked us at frequent intervals.

'Why aren't you doing what I told you to do?' she asked us.

'Because we have already done it,' replied Sarah.

'Well, do it again,' snapped Miss Bight. Her policy was that she wanted us to look busy, probably because she thought one of the Senior Officers (there were three altogether) might be having a look around. Sarah and I spent most of that morning cleaning the same light switch.

By lunch, I was at the end of my tether. I was only halfway through my second day, and I was already wishing that I had never transferred from Bullwood, which was ridiculous, since Bullwood was the most vile and depressing place anyone could imagine and East Sutton Park was a place of great beauty. Why, then, was I slipping into this cafard? As Sarah and I went to join the letter queue I looked over the banisters,

and was seized by an urge to jump – just throw myself over and land on what- or whoever was below me.

Instead of jumping, I went to collect my letter, tears beginning to sting my eyes. I leant against the wall reading the letter. It was from T, the hopeless centrepiece of my artificial love. It was dismissive, offhand. Perhaps he had realised that in the light of my position, I should be discouraged from entertaining any romantic fantasies. It was a bit late for that. I went to the dormitory to find Sarah, howling with misery. Sarah comforted me as I lay on my bed. 'He doesn't love me at all, the bastard,' I sobbed into my pillow.

Sarah said all the right things. 'Of course he does, I'm sure there's a reason for that letter.'

'There is; he doesn't love me . . . '

During this scene, a screw came into the dormitory to see what was going on. As I lay on my bed, she snatched the letter out of my hand.

'Something in your letter is obviously upsetting you,' she said.

I soon forgot my broken heart. How dare she take my letter, or think that it was any of her business? I snatched the letter from her hand.

The screw, who looked drunk, swayed towards me as if to take the letter back again.

'The only thing wrong with me is that I hate being in prison, I hate you, and it's none of your bloody business anyway,' I shouted.

The screw focused on me, her hair flopping forward. 'Go and see your house mother for a chat,' she said, then swayed off.

My house mother, Mrs Walsh, sought me out, as news of my outburst had reached her. She was well versed in telling troubled inmates that time is a great healer, and that we are all human beings. I wondered how she had the nerve to say that. My contempt and hatred of the discipline and administrative staff at ESP was growing.

Apart from my disappointment in love that morning, there were other reasons for my bad reaction to the new prison, but I was finding them hard to pinpoint. A couple of unpleasant screws and insubstantial food couldn't be entirely responsible. As Sarah said, 'It's only another nick.' Surely it was nothing to get het up about? In fact my reaction was very common. Many women found it hard to adjust to life at ESP after the cloistered seclusion of a closed prison cell.

Sarah and I spent that evening trying to work out a way to be shipped out of East Sutton Park without losing remission. We remembered the warning given to us by the AG at Bullwood about the press. We thought of leaking a story revealing our whereabouts and, to ensure that we were both moved, embellishing it by saying that we were lesbians. We were both expecting visits that weekend, and decided to put our plan to our visitors.

By Saturday (when we were allowed an extra half hour in bed), I was familiar with the routine, its regimented precision and pettiness. Our movements were regulated with bells; our failure to get somewhere on time with warnings, or white papers. Our every move was scrutinised by officers who were too willing to find fault. I recognised the need for routine – a daily structure is necessary to most people, whether inside or out – and I had coped with daily life at Bullwood and Holloway, but here I was feeling more insubordinate and ready to rebel than I had in either of the previous prisons. It was the attitude of the screws that made me hate the prison. It was the same for many of the women at ESP, especially the LTIs (long-term inmates). For them, a structure to their day was more important than it was to those of us doing shorter sentences. Getting used to a routine took time and concentration, and was something to cling on to, to make the endless days go faster. As I had seen at

Bullwood, when something went wrong, and the routine varied, it was enough to cause hysteria in those who had come to depend on it; the changes in routine was another of the factors that made it hard for me to adjust to ESP. The tension at East Sutton Park arose between the need for routine and daily order, and the hatred of the way that these things were administered.

For example, on Saturday mornings, those inmates who did not work 'overtime' at their weekday jobs had to spend the morning cleaning the house. This included cleaning the dormitory: a team effort of scrubbing, polishing and tidying. The latter was the worst bit. Although I must have had the same amount of clothes as the other women, they never seemed to fit into my cupboard. There was always one sock which I had missed, or a layer of dust which I failed to wipe with the duster.

'What are these doing up here?' was the frosty question asked on my first inspection. They were my six books, which I had put on the mantelpiece by Sarah's bed, as there was nowhere else to keep them. It turned out that the books were a fire risk, and had to be put somewhere else.

We were subject to rigid inspections. Our cupboards were opened to make sure that we hadn't just thrown our clothes out of the way, but had hung them up neatly. Our beds were checked to see that they had been made properly. The screws also made sure we had no extra towels, work clothes or blankets. There were fines for any transgression of these regulations. Was it congenital, this untidiness of mine? I had always thought that it was because I wasn't really trying, and that one day, I would set my mind to it. Well, there I was, trying because I had to, and yet still there was no improvement.

After the inspection, Sarah and I went to clean the showers, buckets and scrubbing brushes in hand. We

cleaned the pubic hairs from the shower walls, washed the floor and wiped the windows. The hours between meals crawled and my motivation waned. ESP, which had promised to be better than Bullwood, was proving to be the worst place of all.

14

My next visit did nothing to help me settle. My sister Silvy was coming with two friends. Before the visit, I was walking past the dining room where the AG, Mrs Hughes, stopped me.

'Haven't you got a visit today?' she asked.

I nodded.

'Well, for goodness' sake go and tidy yourself up. You look a mess. You haven't even brushed your hair.'

I was outraged that she should make personal comments like that. 'My friends are used to seeing me look like this,' I said, 'and I will not dress up in order to give your prison a good name.' As far as I was concerned, there was nothing wrong with my appearance. I always look scruffy. As for my hair, I had spent ages trying to make it look wild by backcombing it. I was wearing a waistcoat, skirt and boots.

It was unkind of Mrs Hughes, with her clinically fashionable appearance, to swan around being rude about the inmates' dress sense. She knew, as did every screw, that for some women, being separated from their personal possessions like clothes and make-up was one of the worst aspects of prison life. Many wanted to make themselves attractive for their husbands or boyfriends when they visited. Being locked up meant they were unable to use their favourite brand of shampoo or skin cleanser.

Our dormitory was perfectly placed for watching the visitors arrive. Those expecting a visit (numbers varied from about eight to twenty girls on Saturdays and Sundays) crowded into First Front to stare out of the

window. Thus every visitor had to approach the house under collective scrutiny. When I saw Silvy and my friends arrive, I ran downstairs for the obligatory frisk. My mouth, ears and hair were searched. If I had been wearing any jewellery, it would have been written down and checked again when the visit was over. This was to stop inmates from smuggling out jewellery and claiming on the insurance.

The weekend visits were held in the dining room. We were allowed two and a half hours, an hour more than at Bullwood. As soon as I was sitting at the table, holding Silvy's hand, I started to rant about ESP and how much I hated it. I explained about all the petty rules and how I didn't think that I would manage to finish my time without losing remission. The only answer was to have me shipped back to a closed prison. Leaning forward and whispering, I outlined my plan for leaking the story to the press. Silvy thought I had lost my head, and told me that it wasn't worth it. She knew that she wasn't experiencing the horrors of prison, open or closed, but wisely said that being branded a lesbian by the gutter press would not get anyone anywhere.

My bad mood coloured the visit and it did not go smoothly. Instead of visitors going up to the canteen to get the refreshments, I had to do it, so while I was queueing, the visitors sat there talking to each other, when I was the one that they had come to see. If one of them had been able to go, I could have saved the time I spent in the queue talking to the other two. This was a typical example of the sort of thing that was immensely important to us on the inside, but appeared trivial to anyone else. On my way to the canteen, I complained about the system to the screw on duty. 'Your visitors have come a long way to see you. It's up to you to keep them happy.' That enraged me. She was behaving as if I was the hostess at a debs' tea party. When I returned to where my guests were sitting I banged the tray down on the table.

After they left, I was searched again. Anyone at random could be chosen for a strip-search. Then we were called back to the dining hall to clean it up in time for tea. I was angry, annoyed, depressed – anything that could be related to self-pity and despair. Silvy had talked about Clara's wedding arrangements. Exciting as they were, I was too selfish not to dwell on the fact that I could only hear about them, and not join in. Silvy also talked about her recent trip to Mexico with Mum. In the months before my case had come to court, I had planned to go with them. All my misery, hate and frustration came out in a letter that I wrote to my parents, my biggest bugbear being Mrs Hughes.

It was getting dark as I pushed my letter through the prison postbox. Outside, screws were prowling round with torches searching the gardens, paths and hedges, making a routine check for 'drops', which were parcels left by friends or family for the inmate, who would then try to pick them up while on garden duty, or pay another inmate to do it for her. Gossip was exchanged in the dorm about 'drops'. Two weeks earlier, a group of women had been busted for having a 'drops' racket. Their dorm was near enough to the ground floor for their boyfriends to sneak into the grounds of the prison and push parcels, mostly containing food and drink, through the window; they were caught because the women became too sloppy in the disposing of their vodka bottles. Of course, the authorities were worried about what sort of contraband was finding its way into the prison.

Zayib, an Iranian girl, who told me the story, claimed that her husband always smuggled in a steak sandwich when he visited her. Visitors were only allowed to bring fruit and cigarettes, but he managed to pack a steak sandwich into the bottom of a bag of tangerines. Zayib snatched mouthfuls when the screws weren't looking. Once, an inmate came out of the dining room after a visit obviously drunk. Halfway through her husband's

visit, he had told her to 'Bend down and suck it.' The woman didn't want to – not in public. 'Go on, bend down and suck it,' he hissed. He eventually persuaded her. When the screws had their backs turned, she leant down towards her husband's crotch. To her relief, he had a bottle of vodka stuffed down the front of his trousers, with a straw sticking out through his flies. Other visitors injected fruit with gin and vodka, or slipped something into a can of Coca-Cola bought from the prison canteen.

If an inmate was suspected of organising a drop, she was shipped out immediately. Mrs Hughes told each new admission that she could ship anyone out at any time, if she thought that they were involved with drugs. No one in our dorm was tangled up in those kinds of risks. We had made a pact that none of us would smoke in the dormitory because of the risk of us all losing remission. Sarah and I enjoyed an illegal fag after the roll check, but it was not a risk to anyone else but ourselves. We learnt to tell which screws did not try to catch us out by hovering around the loos.

Sneaking off to the loos provided a welcome escape from the incessant chat in the dorm. Kelly, the verbose shoplifter, insisted on telling us about her audacious methods of stealing.

'Once I just wheeled an entire rack of fur coats out of the shop and no one stopped me. I can tell you what, hen, there's no one can hoist like I do.' Kelly's niece had been involved, and was also doing time at ESP; they were both waiting for their parole. The niece was six months pregnant. Mabel, in the bed next to Clare, was suffering from acute constipation; the more she worried, the harder she found it to go. Norah, in the bed next to mine, was excited about her imminent release. I longed for earplugs to block out the noise.

'Did you know the house was haunted, hen?' Kelly asked me. 'They say that a child was killed by its nanny on the stairs here. It was a baby girl, Arabella, and she was

only tiny. Her mother ordered the nanny to do it because she was deformed or something. People say they've heard a baby crying . . . She was smothered, you know.'

There were several versions of what had happened to the unfortunate Arabella. Some claimed that she was actually killed in our dormitory, as it had originally been the nursery. Others said that her body was still incarcerated somewhere in the building. There were women who were terrified of the legend, and refused to go to the lavatory on their own after lights-out.

As at Bullwood and Holloway, there was no general way to categorise the inmates at ESP. There were women from all walks of life, between the ages of seventeen and sixty-five. Offences ranged from armed burglary to shoplifting, with a large proportion of the inmates in for drug-related offences, although many were in for fraud and deception.

Again, I found that I was well known to the inmates. Soon after arriving a fat girl approached me in the shower and asked if I wanted her to get any silver foil out of the kitchen, to smoke heroin on. I told her that I wasn't interested. 'Only trying to help, love,' she said. 'But, if there's anything you want . . . ' Here it was again, the presence of drugs where there should have been protection from them.

Working as a house-cleaner was tedious. Our every move was dogged by trainee officers, trying to catch us skiving. I was impatient to start work in the garden, although other women had horror stories to tell: 'fucking slave labour', was the way most inmates described the garden work. 'You'll wish you were back 'ere once you start working in the garden.' Miss Bight complained about everything that I did. I had tried to perfect the art of 'looking busy' whenever she approached, but as she wore rubber soles, it was impossible to hear her.

Miss Bight was the protégée of one of the Senior

Officers, which made her thoroughly unpopular with all the inmates. This Senior Officer was a lady renowned for her fierce bark, more painful bite, and methods of dealing with the women which many of them considered unjust. Her name was Miss Wheeler. Unlike the screws at Bullwood or Holloway, many of the screws at ESP lived in quarters in the prison grounds. During my time there, I had to work in one of the flats, and saw for myself how depressing and cramped they were. It may be that the general attitude of the screws could be blamed on the fact that they were always within the prison itself and never got away to a life outside. Few of them were married; most had little life beyond socialising with other officers during their time off.

Whatever the reason, they were the worst lot of screws that I came across. They incited tension amongst the inmates by encouraging women to grass; they wrongly accused; and they constantly reminded us that as a lower order of society, anything we said that contradicted them must be wrong. They were a most frustrating and anger-inspiring set of women. Of course there were nice screws at ESP but proportionately far fewer than anywhere else. Our wing at Bullwood was lucky in having quite reasonable screws. At Holloway, they were so impersonal that I have difficulty in remembering any of them individually. At ESP I can remember all the screws, and most of them send a frisson of revulsion up my spine. The fact that there was a considerable number of trainee screws at ESP didn't help: the older inmates felt uncomfortable and resentful at being ordered around by women half their age.

Whatever the reasons for the high proportion of unsympathetic screws, the effect on the inmates' morale was not good. There was also a bitchiness and aggression between us, but of a less physical, more latent way than I had seen before. It was mainly to do with which inmates were suspected of being grasses (Kate in our dorm was

one such suspect) which was a result of the screws' policy to encourage grassing.

There was a comprehensive list of evening classes pinned to the wall outside the Butler's, so, in order to spend as much time as we could away from the discipline staff, Sarah and I put our names down for calligraphy, cookery, guitar, beauty classes, woodwork and art. We didn't expect to do any of these classes. If it was anything like Bullwood, they would be either non-existent or cancelled.

Sarah continued to try to lever me out of my depression, doing her best to encourage me to be optimistic. I wanted to run through the gates, hitch to Maidstone and get a train to Oxford. I had no money and everything to lose, but the temptation was there.

Although there is nothing to stop inmates from leaving – 'We will even pack your sandwiches for you,' is a popular quip used by the AG – if they were stupid enough to try to run away while someone was watching, a police car would be waiting at the end of the drive. It was very rare for anyone to escape and remain free. It was possible to be 'on your toes' for a period of six months or more, but the police nearly always caught up with absconders in the end. Some women ran because they could not bear the transition from a closed prison to an open one: they knew that they would be transferred back to a closed prison when they were caught. Others ran for the hell of it, or because they wanted to see their children, in which case the police always knew where to find them. No one absconded from an open prison or escaped from a closed one and really expected to stay free; it was more a question of how much time they would have before the police came knocking on the door.

Sarah made me snap out of my desire to run. She made me think of my parents' reaction, if I turned up at home three months before my release date. I comforted myself

with the fact that the gates were open, if things became completely unbearable.

Shortly afterwards, the AG sent for me. This time she was sitting in the Governor's office as he was away on holiday. She had the same dark glasses on, the same spotless appearance. My dislike of her was more overwhelming than my nervousness. In her hand, she held the letter that I had written to my parents. An officer had told me that outgoing letters were not censored, except for the first one that we wrote home. I must have wanted her to see it.

'I am sorry that you are so unhappy here,' she began.

I was unmoved. What did she expect? There was no point in her trying to soft-soap me.

'Everyone hates it here when they first arrive, but they all get used to it in the end.'

Only because they have to, I thought. And the women who absconded obviously hadn't got used to it. I remained silent.

'And that remark I made about you being scruffy was only meant to be a joke.'

I couldn't let that pass. 'Well, it didn't sound like one,' I replied.

She went on to say that sending the letter would be selfish, as my parents would worry when they received it. If I had any complaints to make about the way that the prison was run, I should make them to her, or the Board of Prison Visitors. In the letter, I had asked my mother to try to arrange another session with my psychotherapist. 'Why didn't you ask me?' – a practised look of concern on her face – 'I'm sure we could arrange something.' She finished by saying that she would not insist that I rewrote the letter, but that she hoped I would think of my parents and choose to do so of my own volition.

I wondered if she thought I was going to leak a sensational story to the press: 'Slave labour in women's open prison endorsed by female Assistant Governor . . . '

Many of the inmates urged me to do something like that; we used to think up some juicy headlines.

Before leaving Mrs Hughes's office, I told her exactly how much I hated ESP and the way we were treated by the screws. I knew my outburst wouldn't make any difference, but writing the letter and giving Mrs Hughes a piece of my mind acted as a sort of release which helped to lift me out of my depression. It didn't stop me from being angered by her attitude. I felt that if I had any complaints it would be pointless to go to the Board of Prison Visitors: their official position held no clout. Inmates who thought they were being seriously maltreated or victimised could go to the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) but they were really only in a position to offer legal advice and moral support. They are a small group for the number of cases they are begged to cover, and in the majority of cases they are unable to bring an individual grievance to a satisfactory legal conclusion. One of the difficulties in doing so is that maltreatment in prison is very hard to prove.

Deep down, I knew that the trivialities and complexities of prison life were dominating my moods, which were not helped by the fact that my longed-for romance was a flop. It was becoming harder to rely on the 'Well, it's only for another few months' line. Halfway through my sentence, I was behaving one moment as if I had been in prison for years, the next as if I had only arrived the day before. My EDR looked almost further away than it had on 5 December.

15

There was a telephone box that the inmates could use, although it did not take coins. For the privilege of using it, we had to buy a twenty-unit phonecard costing £2.00 with our private spends (which meant going without other things like shampoo or soap), or we could save up our wages and buy one at the canteen, which meant sacrificing some of our precious tobacco ration. When Sarah and I arrived at ESP we were issued with emergency private spends, as we had both missed the monthly date for ordering toiletries. Another of the privileges was that we could order our shopping from proper shops like Boots or the Body Shop in Maidstone. But these luxuries were expensive, and our £8.99 per month did not go far.

As soon as we could, Sarah and I bought a phonecard each. We collected them from the canteen along with the conditions of their use. We must not lend them, or use anyone else's. If caught doing so, we would lose remission and have our cards taken away. We were not allowed to have more than two cards in our possession at any one time and the telephone was not to be used during working hours.

After tea that evening Sarah and I waited by the telephone until 6 p.m. for the cheap rate to begin. Because we had been issued with private spends in the middle of the month, everyone else had used up their phonecards and there was no queue for the phone. At 6 p.m. I dialled my home number. Mum didn't know about the phonecards, and again thought that I had run away.

'Where are you, darling?' she asked frantically, expecting me to say Swindon station.

I told her about the phonecards, but it was still unnerving, talking to each other on the telephone without a screw standing by to tell me to ring off. Mum yelled to Dad and Silvy that I was on the telephone. I had a quick word with Dad, who passed me on to Silvy. Perhaps it was out of envy of their cosy little group sitting by the fire, listening to the wireless, knitting, having a glass of wine, that when I heard Silvy's voice I started shouting at her about some tapes I'd asked her to send which hadn't yet arrived. My outburst ruined her excitement at talking to me. I put the phone down before she even had a chance to say she was sorry; then I realised how upset she would be. Bursting into tears, I redialled and used up my remaining units telling her how sorry I was and how much I loved them all.

In the dorm that night, I had that emptiness that always comes after a bout of heavy crying. I pulled on my floral pyjamas, shuffled to the washroom to brush my teeth, then crawled into bed.

'Well,' said Kelly in her thick Scottish accent, 'that's another day up the judge's arse.' I didn't want to, but I couldn't help laughing. I hoped that Judge Otton was finding it difficult to walk.

Sarah and I had to do the prison induction course on the following Tuesday. 'Boring, but better than working' was the general attitude to it. We started at a leisurely 9 a.m. as opposed to 8.15 a.m. There were three of us, Sarah, myself and a girl called Michelle, who had arrived from Cookham Wood the day before.

We were met by Mr Madden, the head of the education department, a small man with a funny eye. Not being a member of the discipline staff, he did not look down on us as if we were half-baked. He explained that the purpose of the induction course was to familiarise us

with the numerous rules and quirks of the prison. We were introduced to Mr Neill, the head gardener, who told us how the wage system worked. Our wages were paid in real money, instead of on paper as they had been at Holloway and Bullwood. We were not allowed to keep the money in our possession: it was handed to us in the canteen by the screw on duty. We then had either to spend it all or return what was left over as savings for the officer to look after.

Mr Neill ran through the procedure for changing jobs, which was straightforward. We had to fill in a form stating why we wanted to change, and get a report from our present boss.

Then Mrs Peters, the deputy head of the education department, talked to us. With her, we discussed the 'female' aspects of prison life: what to do if someone in our dorm had a hygiene problem – gently suggest that they try a different brand of soap; how to avoid picking up contagious diseases – by getting our own china mugs sent in and avoiding using the plastic prison ones, as they spread infections more easily; what to do about contraception.

Not an immediate concern within the prison, contraception was becoming an increasingly important issue for women released on a day's parole. At the Governor's discretion, women were allowed out on a day's licence for special reasons such as job interviews, family funerals, or to sort out their accommodation after their release.

Women with boyfriends or husbands practically always managed to have sex at some point during the day. Inmates often ended up getting pregnant, which the authorities were trying to prevent. Any inmate leaving the prison for home leave or a day's parole was to be issued with a packet of condoms. It was thought that making this standard practice would solve the problem of the women going out of the prison who were too embarrassed to ask for contraceptive advice. Those going out for the day

would never ask, as they thought it would give the game away. This way, no questions had to be asked.

Mrs Peters turned to Michelle, who had done twenty-two months of her seven-year sentence.

'You're coming up for your home leave soon, Michelle,' she said. 'We'll certainly issue you with a packet of five.'

'Blimey,' said Michelle, 'I think I'm going to need a few more than five.'

I wondered if they'd have PD (prison department) stamped on them. We laughed about the condoms and then Mrs Peters became serious.

'I'd just like to say how shocked I was about your treatment at Holloway. Let me assure you that nothing like that will happen to you here.'

Sarah and I sat and listened while Michelle and Mrs Peters talked about Michelle's experiences in Holloway. Doing a seven-year sentence for heroin-dealing. Michelle was an addict, and continued to use heroin whenever she could get hold of it in prison. She did a long time in Holloway, and became very knowledgeable about which screws were bent, both morally and sexually. Every internal offence committed by a prisoner is written on a red sheet and put in the prisoner's file. It became apparent that red sheets were mysteriously appearing in Michelle's file: offences that she had never been charged with. Pages were ripped out of her medical file, and psychiatrists insinuated that she was mad. Michelle had been very ill as a result of her addiction and walked with a limp because she had lost a kidney, but she was definitely not mad. In her view, all these things were responsible for the fact that she got a total knock-back on her parole, the effect of a conspiracy by the prison authorities to keep her inside prison, rather than out on the streets, and free to blab.

After being kept in solitary for 'observation', Michelle decided to call in the National Council for Civil Liberties.

She wasn't sure what the authorities were up to, but she knew that she needed advice and support from an independent body. From her conversation with Mrs Peters, I couldn't tell how instrumental the NCCL had been, but a deal was struck. Michelle agreed to be shipped out to another prison if she could see her children under normal visiting conditions, instead of the closed visits that she had been subjected to. As soon as she had seen her children, she was shipped out to Cookham Wood, where she settled in, found a girlfriend, and was not singled out in the same way that she had been at Holloway. So she was upset about her transfer to ESP, and found herself unable to cope with the noise and freneticism; her girlfriend had stayed at Cookham, and her wish to finish her 'bird' in relative peace was out of the question.

Michelle was easy to talk to and had a wry sense of humour. She told me, half-jokingly, that she wasn't planning on coming back after her home leave. 'Well, if you've got seven years, twenty-eight days for absconding isn't going to make much difference, is it?'

To me, it would have been another lifetime. To Michelle, it was just another month.

Mrs Peters showed us round the soft furnishing course and the vocational training course. Both carried diplomas. Women attended these courses as an alternative to jobs. There was always competition between the inmates to see who could get on to a course; just as at Bullwood, the typing course had been over-subscribed. It was a question of getting your name down first. If you arrived at the prison at the wrong time, and the course was fully booked, then it was just bad luck. For those doing the soft furnishing and vocational training at East Sutton Park there were advantages. They could wear their own clothes, and did not have to suffer the physical hardships of those working on garden, maintenance or farming jobs. The women doing cookery and household management were taken shopping in Maidstone, although

they were not allowed to handle or purchase anything themselves. Courses were relatively sedate and humane and at ESP they were run with more precision than at Bullwood, where the education department had hiccups in its regularity.

Stories circulated about vodka bottles stuffed up skirts slipping through the compulsory search.

The works department attended to prison maintenance. Headed by two male non-discipline officers, they mended the roof, tended the sewer and repaired any broken fixtures inside and out of the prison. There was a farm where inmates worked feeding the pigs and cows. The park was kept up by the prisoners, overseen by the dour Mr Neill. Screws took it in turns to do 'garden duty', making sure that the jobs were done and that all the inmates were in their allotted places. Other jobs included surgery, gym and officers' orderly. The latter involved getting up at 6 a.m. to light the fire in the hall. The kitchen workers earned the most money, with a maximum wage of about £4 per week. They had an early shift rota for breakfast duty, and also got up at 6 a.m.

Mrs Peters showed us round the entire prison, which was huge and confusing after the bland, sanitary corridors of Bullwood: ESP was riddled with winding passages and back staircases.

Any requests had to be made on a Governor's App., which was found on the landing by the telephone. Apps had to be handed in first thing in the morning, while we signed the register. If an officer wanted to see an inmate, she would be sent for in the 'Gun Room', a pokey little office in the hall where the erstwhile lord of the manor had kept his guns. Inmates were not allowed to walk though the hall while the officers had their break, nor use the front door except when entering or leaving the prison, or for specific work reasons. Any inmate caught wearing another inmate's clothes could be put on report. We were not allowed food in the dormitories, or to swap

food in the refectory. There wasn't a hope of the 'I'll swap my marmalade for your porridge' routine that had been the dawn chorus at Bullwood.

That evening, a notice was put up outside the Butler's, giving details of new work allocations. Sarah and I had not been put together: she was on the works party, I was in the gardens. The notice told those of us who had not already done so to go and collect our work clothes from the laundry. Off I went along another corridor to queue, this time for my uniform. One by one we filed in, like munition workers or miners.

An elderly lady in dungarees barked at me, 'What size are you?'

'Small,' I said, feeling a bit silly – my size must have been obvious. I thought she was a screw wearing the same clothes as a prisoner, but she called the officer on duty 'Miss'.

She started to load items of clothing into my arms. 'Two pairs of dungarees, two vests, two T-shirts, two jumpers, two undersocks, two thick socks and that's it. Don't lose any of it or you'll be fined.' She had a grey bun and her schoolmistress voice was unmistakably English, with an upper-crust edge that spoke of hunting and swigs of port at meets.

'Who was that?' I asked Sarah.

'That's Elizabeth Joy,' she replied. 'She hit her lover over the head with a champagne bottle and killed him. Apparently they'd just finished doing it, when he told her he was leaving her for a younger woman and she just flipped. They'd been together for twenty years but weren't married, so she had no security or anything. They lived in France, but she insisted that she be tried in England. Her lawyers told her she was barmy as she would have been let off for a crime of passion in France. She got life over here. She's a nosey old sod, a real busybody. She must have been nuts not to stay in France.'

I remembered her case; it had been in the newspapers about four years before. I wondered what she made of her present life.

The next morning found me up and sprightly in full work kit. At 8.10 a.m., the first work bell went. I was instructed to follow a horde of garden workers to the boot lodge, where we jammed our feet into a pair of stiff shiny boots that completed the get-up, and put on duffel coats and gloves. We then clomped some distance to the garden shed where we congregated for a roll check and were told by a screw in charge what we would be doing, and which tools we needed. We collected them from the rack along the shed wall, signed for each one in another book, and got going.

A number of us were told to 'do the bank'. Armed with rakes and buckets, we walked back past the house (the main prison building was always referred to as the house) and up the front drive. On our right was a mass of uneven earth. Our job was to separate the stones from the topsoil, put them into buckets and empty them into the trailer parked on the drive. It was a cold day and carrying the heavy buckets was a laborious and painful process. I had had no real exercise for months and now, suddenly, every muscle in my body was being stretched like rubber. Around me, women in their forties and fifties were struggling with great logs and overladen wheelbarrows. Many of them were too scared to sit down for a rest. As in the house, if we were caught 'skiving' trouble followed.

Rather than have my wages docked for 'dossing', I set to work with freezing hands and face. I lifted and raked until every part of me ached. The women I was working with, Janice, Za-Za and Paulette, black and good-natured, did not believe in suffering in silence. Their conversation was a continual laceration of Mr Neill and they peppered their talk with giggles and swear words. In for drug-related offences, they had,

like me, been told that they would not be sent to an open prison. Now that they were in one, they too were not sure that it was a good idea.

Janice was doing six years for conspiracy to supply cocaine. She was philosophical, saved from despondency by her buoyant temper. She and Paulette both had children, and said that they had committed their crimes principally for them. Paulette and Za-Za had both done cannabis runs from Jamaica. 'Now we in de rass clot jail house,' Paulette said. None of them was coerced into crime, nor were they criminals as a result of a mental deficiency: they had undertaken the risks fully aware of the possible consequences. Paulette, who was bringing up her child on her own, claimed that the money was irresistible. She had done a run before, and would not hesitate to do the same thing again. 'Why should my kid grow up poor just 'cos I on my own and can't get no man to look after him? Why should my child wear cast-offs and hand-me-downs and live on white man's charity? I want him to have a good time, man, I want a good time!' Although she was bitter about the government, which she claimed was doing nothing to help poor people in her position, she was not racist, as were so many of my fellow inmates at all three prisons. Even if punishment by imprisonment is justified, the jollity, good humour and intelligence of these women made me sure that they would respond to more guidance and help than prison was offering them.

At the end of the day I had at least made some friends, but I could hardly move from exhaustion and cold. My boots had been too tight; two raw blisters suppurated on my ankles.

Sarah had fared better with her job on the works party. She was working with civilians who treated her with friendliness and respect. She was the assistant to a man called Johnny, who admitted to her on the first day that he would kill himself if his daughters ended up in a place

like ESP. Sarah told me that one of the girls on the works party was leaving soon, and that I should apply for her job so that we could work together.

That evening, a friend of Kelly's came into our dorm from the room across the passage. She swaggered over to my bed. 'What did you go and get mixed up with drugs for?' I was used to such insolent tones – I pretended to carry on reading my book. 'You 'eard me didn't yer? Or are we too posh to talk to the likes of me?'

'I don't know who you are,' I said, 'but you've made it clear what kind of papers you read.'

She looked a bit taken aback.

Then I said, 'Why did you get involved in armed burglary?' which was a mistake.

'I got a kid to feed, ain't I? You try living alone on social. What they give you ain't enough to pay fer a bus fare. Don't try and tell me that you spent two years of your life hangin' around for child benefits.'

I hadn't, and fell silent.

She changed tactics and sat on the end of my bed. 'Do us a favour,' she asked.

I wished she'd do me a favour and leave me alone.

'Go and get us a light for me fag. All you 'ave to do is go along to the BBC room and wait till a screw ain't lookin'. Then light a rollie, and run back 'ere wiv it.'

I was astonished at her cheek. She was asking me to risk losing twenty-eight days' remission after she had come into our dorm to abuse me.

'Sod off,' I said. 'Get someone else to do your dirty work for you.' The dorm had been in silence, listening to my exchange with 'Morty' as she was known.

Kelly praised me for not going to get her a light. 'But I ain't 'alf fond of the daft bitch,' she said as she put on her pyjamas.

Three of our dorm were on the verge of being released, and the conversation turned to the good times they were going to have. Mavis, in the bed between me and Sarah,

insisted that she was going to spend her first night of freedom at home with her husband watching the television.

'Oh, come on love, you'll be wanting to rave it up a bit, you know, have a drink and a fuck.' Kelly's throaty laugh rang out as Sarah and I looked at each other. We were playing backgammon on her bed, keeping ourselves to ourselves, although it was hard not to laugh aloud. We had never been to the cinema together, gone on holiday together or walked down a street together. Every situation we found ourselves in required support from the other, yet it was as if the severe restrictions and demands placed on our friendship strengthened it.

As well as a sense of humour, Sarah and I shared a subversive desire to rebel. One way we found to get back at the system was through food. Mr Ryland, the head cook, had gone for the same option as Bullwood regarding vegans. Sarah and I were given a box of supplies which were to last us all the week. At tea, we stuffed our dolly bags full of bread and marge, then went to the dormitory for peanut-butter and Marmite sandwiches. The fact that it was a reportable offence made it exhilarating.

When the other women in the dorm saw what was going on, the usual bartering started: 'I'll swap yer a couple of rollies for a Marmite sandwich . . . '

There was a woman in the dorm opposite who was a good friend of Mabel's. Small, shrill and foul-mouthed, Ann's conversation was strung together by obscenities – 'Fucking hell my fanny itches,' was the standard delivery. She used to beg us to part with our luxuries. She had put in a Governor's App. to move into our dorm when there was a vacancy. I'm sure it was because of the food.

16

Working in the garden was every bit as bad as I had been told it would be. The weather was cold and windy and Janice, Paulette, Za-Za and I carried on working on the bank, swamped by our coarse duffel coats, overshadowed by the courtyard clock whose hands made time stand still. One day we were joined by Denise. One of her front teeth was missing – she said she'd lost it in a fight. She was telling us about her home leave, and the perm she was going to have, when there was an agonised shriek from the trailer. One of the workers from the other side of the bank had gone to empty her bucket of stones and had accidentally knocked the metal bar that joined the trailer to the tractor. It had come crashing down on to her foot, grinding it into the earth and trapping it. We all ran down to help her but were powerless to lift the bar. Her dark face was drained of colour and contorted with pain. She lay back on the earth, whimpering and shocked. Someone ran for help. Janice was holding the injured girl's hand, the rest of us tried to free her foot. Slowly we eased it out but the boot was wedged. A layer of skin stayed with it; the foot itself was grey, grazed and visibly swelling.

Many of the inmates who heard about the accident were indignant about it; they thought that Mr Neill should have made sure that the trailer's bar was more secure. The trailer was Mr Neill's responsibility, and therefore he must be to blame. One of the factors that sparked off this indignation was that anyone who was confined to sitting-room rest through illness had their pay cut to

the minimum wage at ESP. (By contrast, anyone at Bullwood who went RIC (rest in cell) was not affected by a wage cut.) This was an ESP measure to reduce skiving, but it wasn't fair on the women with injuries incurred through no fault of their own. If an accident happened to an inmate as a result of negligence on the part of the authorities, there was a procedure whereby the inmate could file for compensation. Depending on the circumstances, they might be successful. In this case, the injured girl did not try to sue Mr Neill. She hobbled around on crutches for several weeks, limping to canteen to spend her sick pay.

At the opposite end of the garden from the bank we were working on was a greenhouse, where flowers were grown, and used for Home Office flower arrangements. To the right were a number of plastic tunnels that had been damaged by the snowy weather that had affected us at Bullwood. Paulette and I were removed from the bank work, and ordered to dig trenches along the sides of the tunnels in order to free the plastic sheeting which had been trapped in the earth. All day we shovelled the clogged soil, tunnelling our way through the mud. It was chilly, with sporadic rain and gusts of wind.

The Governor, just back from holiday, came round to inspect the gardens. He smiled down on us as we scrabbled around in the waist-deep trench that we had dug. I was disgusted with the gruelling work, and the complacent attitude of those overseeing our labour. Did the Governor enjoy watching the older women chopping and digging until they were faint with tiredness, flapping their arms to keep out the cold? Every now and then a screw, walkie-talkie attached to her belt, came to check up on us, to see how much we had done, and if we were still there. Most of all I was sickened by my own attitude. While nurturing hate and resentment for this apparently useless exploitation, I found myself eager to win the approbation of those inspecting our work. I wanted to

be told that I had dug a good trench, and that my diligence had not gone unnoticed. Why I wanted to please these people I don't know. Perhaps I had already become enmeshed in the prison way of life to such an extent that the overall futility of what I was doing had become less important than the daily recognition of my labours.

The tunnels were about a thirty-second walk from the back gates of the prison which, like the front ones, were open. Because of our proximity to the outside world, the screws were doubly paranoid about our whereabouts. It was a strict rule that we had to be in the exact place that we were sent to; any reason for leaving it (e.g. in order to go to the lavatory) had to be reported to a screw. I found this out to my cost when I went to the outside lavatory without informing anyone. When I returned, there was a red-faced screw, clutching her walkie-talkie.

'I was about to report you missing. Leaving your place of work without permission is technically absconding. You will have 50p docked from your wages.'

The next day, my job was to rake leaves off the lawn and wheel them in a trolley to the prison rubbish dump. The dust track I had to walk along to get there was at the top of a sloping meadow. I could see the mist clinging to the trees in the Weald; the countryside was open and unspoilt. To my left were prying eyes, suspicious of my every movement. Paranoia, spawned in the officers, bred freely in the inmates.

While we were raking, the conversation turned to Kate, the blonde in our dorm; she had a reputation for being a grass because of the stupid lies she told and her friendliness with the screws. There was obviously someone who was giving the screws information, as women with lighters had been searched in the corridors, and inmates who had secret phonecards found themselves hauled before an adjudication with no warning. Kate inevitably fell under suspicion: she was the perfect scapegoat.

I was sorry for Kate. She was unnaturally childish, and

unable to cope with prison life. She was like a character from a girls' school comic, always wanting to be everyone's friend, but only successful in repelling people. She got herself into arguments through stupidity rather than aggression. Kate suffered the sort of treatment that I had expected to receive when I first went to Holloway. She was jostled and pushed in queues, sneered at, heckled and teased wherever she went. The more hostility she encountered, the more she turned to the screws.

The only person who offered Kate any sympathy was Zayib, the Iranian in the dormitory, who was kind, and a good friend to Kate. Zayib's sense of proportion and fairness made me like and respect her. I was sad to see Kate being treated badly, especially as I was reasonably sure that the accusations were unfounded. Kate didn't know enough of what went on around her to be able to give the screws any useful information. My theory was that the grass was someone much more involved in the mainstream of inmate life.

Dormitory life was making Sarah and me increasingly restless. Working hard all day took its toll and we were always physically exhausted by tea. Kelly's snoring had become such a problem that I began to dread lights-out. The scuffles and breathings of First Front faded into insignificance compared with the thunderous resonance of Kelly's snores. I had been to the surgery for a pair of ear plugs, but they kept out only a part of it. One night I could stand it no longer. Tiptoeing over to Kelly's bed, where she lay on her back, I pinched her nose as hard as I could – someone had once told me that it is an effective way to stop snoring. As I did so, the gurgling and grunting stopped. Pleased with my success, I returned to bed. Unfortunately, Kate had witnessed the whole thing.

'You shouldn't have done that,' she whispered.

'Shut up,' I whispered back. 'If you wake her, she'll start again.'

'Well, I think it's very rude,' Kate huffed.

Kelly was none the wiser, but a great deal quieter, so I didn't think that any harm had been done.

In the morning, Kate decided that Kelly should know about the assault on her nose. As we stood in the queue for a Saturday morning job, Kelly marched up, wagging her finger in my face.

'You should na' pinch my nose when I'm asleep,' she shouted. 'You got no right. If you don't like my snoring, then wake me up and tell me. What a liberty! I've a good mind to punch you in the face.'

Kate was standing in the background, looking as if her conscience had insisted that she tell Kelly about my pinching her nose. She turned to go, but I called her back. We then had a row about it. I told her that she was stupid to interfere, she told me that I was spoiled: if everyone else had to put up with it, why couldn't I? I replied that I had no intention of being a lemming, and that my method of silencing Kelly's snores would have worked perfectly if Kate had minded her own business.

The story was soon circulated around the prison. Unfortunately for Kate, her unpopularity swung opinion in my favour. Kelly even came up and apologised for her outburst, and admitted that if Kate hadn't told her about the nose-squeezing, she would never have known. This incident was typical of the mountain-out-of-a-molehill arguments that flared up in everyday prison life. Kate's reputation got worse: she was now deemed responsible for a number of locker break-ins.

The bed opposite Sarah's became vacant and I applied to be allowed to move into it. My request was granted. During the morning break, I went up to the dorm to start moving my things around, to find that someone else had already settled into the space I had asked for.

'Excuse me,' I began, 'but I've just been granted permission to move into that bed.'

'Well, that's not my fault, is it?' came the dog-bark reply. The woman was black, tall and defensive. Hatred

and hostility came across in her every gesture. She carried on putting her things away with her back to me. On her pinboard I noticed photographs of healthy, smiling children. I didn't change beds, as I could get nowhere with the taciturn newcomer, so I went downstairs again. I bumped into Kelly, who was in a nervous flap.

'She's moved into our dorm . . . I'll no be havin' her there, the bitch . . . '

It turned out that the new admission in the bed opposite Sarah's was a notorious prisoner. Her crime had been to torture and batter her children; a crime not tolerated by other prisoners. She had been moved to an open prison for her own safety. Her fellow inmates in the closed prison she had moved from had seen to it that she spent most of her time in solitary. Being Category D prisoners, we were supposed to be more responsible, and a good deal less violent. Crimes against children upset women prisoners terribly, especially if they had children of their own. Of course it is difficult not to judge other people, but I was surprised at the level of intolerance in the inmates' internal code of morality. None of them knew the details of this woman's case: for all we knew she might have been covering up for her husband, who might have attacked or beaten her. However, the fact that she had been convicted was enough in the eyes of the other inmates to make her a pariah.

My defence of Hilary, our new dorm-mate, was only an attempt to be objective. I did not like her at all. She was sullen, snappy and rude to everyone. The atmosphere in the dorm became unbearably tense after she arrived. Kelly especially could not bear having Hilary in the dorm, and made her feelings quite clear. Every time Hilary left the room, her exit would be followed by a hail of abuse. Hilary's unpopularity was not helped by the fact that she had terrible BO: the room was infused by the constant, acrid smell of stale sweat. I remembered Mrs Peters's advice on the induction course: in cases of insufficient

personal hygiene, guide the inmate with the problem to a new brand of soap. I was certainly not going to make any helpful suggestions to Hilary and no one else looked eager to volunteer. She never smiled or made an effort to talk to us; I discovered from Janice and Paulette that she was fiercely racist, referring to us as 'white trash' behind our backs.

The other 'baby-basher' at ESP was a loud, fat, black girl called Mamma. She was the officers' orderly, and took a great pride in the log fire that she tended, which blazed in the fireplace in the hall. Mamma and I made friends standing in the queue for the surgery. Some of us were discussing crime and prison, while Mamma stood quietly in front of me.

'You're very quiet today, Mamma,' said the nurse, who was counting us.

'Yeah, well dis talk makes me sad. I don't know if I ever come inside again, but it sure as hell won't be for what I came in last time.'

Everyone was amazed by her show of remorse. I smiled at her, and we started talking about something different. She developed a habit of giving me crushing bear hugs, enveloping me in the folds of her great bosom. Other inmates were scared of Mamma, and warned me not to talk to her, but she was always kind to me.

One particularly cold morning, I was sent with a pretty blonde girl called Anita to a place called the deer lodge to chop logs for the fire. Anita had done five months on her toes after escaping from her escort officers before a court hearing. When the police caught up with her she was sent to Holloway, then Cookham Wood. When I met her, she was waiting to hear about her application to go to Askham Grange in Yorkshire, which is a hostel where inmates are helped to find jobs in York and allowed home every other weekend. By breaktime we had amassed a passable pile of logs.

At the roll check, I was told that my probation officer, Ian Thurley, had come to see me. I liked him and having a visit instead of chopping logs in the freezing cold was an unexpected piece of luck. He was waiting for me in the record room. Although he didn't smoke, he had brought me a packet of ten cigarettes to smoke while we talked. He asked me about ESP and I told him that I hated it. He appeared to be slightly uncomfortable; he had come to tell me that my grandmother (on my father's side) had died. Mum had asked him if he would do so, as she was scared that she would make a hash of it on the phone or on a visit.

I didn't know what to say. It was all far away, as if I was looking through a telescope the wrong way round. I had known for a long time that Granny was ill; she was in her nineties and had had several falls. She had sent me a letter written with every ounce of her strength in a shaking hand, sending me her love. All through my six months on bail she had taken pains to let me know that she loved me. For weeks I had thought, I must write, she would be so pleased, but I hadn't. I hated my selfishness in not having done so, and the idiocy of dwelling on 'if onlys'. Ian was saying something about sorting out a day's licence for the funeral. I was miles away, wondering about how Dad was feeling. Apart from us, he had no other family alive at all. Without realising it, I began to shake. I longed desperately to be at home with Mum and Dad.

When the visit was over, Ian went to the Gun Room to talk to a Senior Officer. The words 'Governor's Application' and 'It should be possible . . . ' floated through the half-shut door. I stood outside like an obedient dog, certain that this request for a day's parole would be ignored.

A screw came up and thrust her face against mine. 'Are you all right? You look a bit pale to me.'

'My grandmother's died.'

'Oh dear, well, never mind. Aren't you supposed to be working in the gardens?'

Ian squeezed my hand and left. I felt spare and hopeless, as if I was in a room where everyone is talking to someone else. I was ordered back to work; back to the shed to report my return, back to the deer lodge to chop wood. There was no one in the shed, so I sat down, not caring if anyone found me not working, thinking only of death, separation, sadness. My thoughts were with my family. They would have started arrangements for the funeral. How would I and my sisters feel if Mum or Dad died? What was going through Dad's mind? I wasn't upset because I was still numb from being told the news. Not for the first time, nature was providing me with her shock barrier which stopped me from taking it all in at once.

The screw in charge found me mooning into space and sent me back to the deer lodge, where Anita was sympathetic, and gave me a rollie to cheer me up.

That evening, I was told by a Senior Officer to make a Governor's App. for a day's parole. I was also given permission to ring my parents from the Gun Room instead of with my phonecard. I spoke to Dad who was half miserable and half relieved: Granny's illness had been a strain on him for a long time.

Mum nearly dropped the telephone when she found out that I might be allowed out for the day. 'I'll come and collect you. What time shall I arrive?'

My mind was in a limbo. I stood holding the receiver limply. 'I don't know if I want to come.'

Silence from the other end, then, 'But darling, you must think of us . . . '

'But I do, all the time. It's just that I don't know if I could stand going home, knowing that I have to come back again.' I would never have dreamt that I could have said something like that, or thought that an opportunity to go home was anything but heaven-sent; but the situation was confusing, even disturbing. It was difficult for my

parents to understand my attitude, as it is for anyone who has never been inside to know what happens to the mind of a prisoner after even a short time. Much as I loathed my surroundings, the truth was that I had become institutionalised, to the extent that the prospect of such a change in surroundings, for only one day, was alarming rather than exciting.

The Governor called me into his office the next day. His chubby face wore a permanent smile, as if he was embarrassed. Inmates in the dorm had told me that if I wanted to go to my grandmother's funeral I should 'lay it on thick'. Falteringly, I mumbled out my bereavement monologue. Halfway through, I was stopped by the Governor. 'Never mind all that, you can go.'

I had expected a battle, and was surprised by the ease with which I was granted the day out.

So I was going home for the day. The thought was bewildering, like going on an aeroplane for the first time; I didn't even know if I was happy about it. Sarah asked me to ring her mother when I got home, with messages. Sarah's experience of driving past her home, when she went to court for her drunk-driving offence, and not being allowed in must have been torture. Why was I being so pathetic about a day's parole?

Mum had been informed of my day out. The day after I received permission from the Governor, I rang her back from the Gun Room. She was beside herself with excitement, as well as trying to see things from my point of view. 'Of course I understand if you feel a bit funny,' she said.

The other women in the dorm were delighted that one of us should be going out. Who was going to be there? Did I want to borrow clothes, make-up, hair gel? I explained that as my Granny had been ninety-seven, there wasn't likely to be any talent at her funeral.

The night before I was due to go, Mrs Peters said to

me, 'I hear you're going for a day's parole tomorrow. I was just wondering if you had been issued with a packet of condoms yet.'

'I'm going to my grandmother's funeral,' I replied soberly. 'I don't think I'll be needing them.'

17

The evening before I went, the clothes that I was to wear to the funeral were taken to Reception for the night. My outfit was drab; an ankle-length black skirt gathered at the bottom like a bubble, a black waistcoat and black polo-neck jumper. The sombre ensemble did not match my mood. By this time I was looking forward to going: my apprehension had been knocked out of me by my dorm-mates. If the build-up of excitement before a visit was bad, this was almost unbearable. I was actually going home, to eat, drink and breathe with my family. It was a day free of the tyrannies of the garden work, although I had been warned that a day's parole meant a drop in next week's wages. We sat in the dorm discussing what I was likely to be doing in twelve hours' time. The journey was going to take us three hours. I was being collected at eight, and had to be back by six, which left me four hours in the comfort of my own home.

Emerging from Reception the next day, I was told that Mum had already arrived. Before running out into the drive to hug her, I had to sign out in the Gun Room. The Senior Officer gave me an envelope of small change for travel and food. 'Oh, don't worry about that,' I said. 'I'm sure my parents will give me something to eat.' I was made to take it anyway: it was prison rules. Then they let me go. I bolted out through the front door to see our car. Mum leapt out and hugged me ferociously, to the delight of all the inmates looking out of the window. We both turned to wave to Sarah, then drove through the gates on to the narrow windy lanes. We were driven by Martin,

a friend of ours, as Mum had decided that she would be too emotional to drive.

By the time we got to our exit on the M4, every tree began to look familiar. Martin could barely drive fast enough; I was sitting on the edge of my seat, urging him on. As he steered the car in through our gates we were seconds away from seeing Dad, Lily and Silvy. Clara was away with her fiancé, and had not been able to make it back in time. Then I was being dragged from the car by my sisters and hauled inside. I found Dad flustering over last-minute arrangements. He nearly keeled over from the force of my hug.

With difficulty, we calmed down and discussed the arrangements for the funeral and the lunch afterwards. People had started to arrive in the village, parking their cars and walking towards the church. Mum poured us all a large glass of sherry: it was my first sip of alcohol for over three months. Without a thought for the block capital letters at the foot of my day's licence forbidding me to drink, I downed two, one after the other, and felt drunk.

In the church I sat between the cold stone wall and Mum, who hugged me throughout the service. My head was light from sherry and freedom, however transient. People were staring at me. I could almost hear the whispers: 'But isn't that Rosie? I thought she was meant to be . . . ' There was no tragedy in the occasion, just a sad acceptance of the inevitable. After the service we stood in the hall, her godchildren, grandchildren, friends and companions, all marvelling at how amazing she had been for a ninety-seven-year-old.

With my head so unaccustomed to drink, two glasses of red wine sent me reeling into a semi-circle of vicars, whose expressions of concern at my prison plight deepened as I launched into an account of the lesbianism and sanitation problems. Silvy steered me away into the kitchen, where I was made to eat three large slices of bread and a plate of lasagne. I devoured the bubbly

cheese top without a thought for my veganism.

In the doorway separating the hall from the kitchen passage I stood watching the gathering of friends and family. It was as if I had opened a door to another world. The low murmur of voices had nothing to do with me. Although being at home was the most natural part of my life, I was confused by the fact that I had become immersed in another existence as remote from my present surroundings as desert hermits or mountain gurus. Being drunk didn't help. I couldn't reconcile my two worlds, prison and home. I ran up the stairs to the peace of my bedroom, tucked away in the attic, where I couldn't hear the indistinguishable voices from the hall.

There was a knock, and Lily came in. She sat by me on the bed. 'How are you feeling?' she asked.

'Weird,' was all I could come up with.

'It must be strange for you coming out of prison for the day. A bit like boarding school, I suppose.' I couldn't reply.

Describing prison in terms of a girls' boarding school or a hospital was an easy way out, and one which I used myself in letters, to create a lighter picture for the recipients.

The familiarity of being cooped up with other women (although the age differences made it unfamiliar at the same time) and having to live by a prescribed set of rules which we delighted in breaking were the loose resemblances between them. The psychological differences were so obvious and deep-rooted that trying to correlate the two was pointless. As far as I was concerned, having gone to boarding school did not ensure a smoother passage when I went to prison.

There was a commotion in the hall. Two reporters from the local press had turned up on the doorstep, wanting to know if I had come to my grandmother's funeral. My mother, fortified by wine, dealt with them. I watched from the window, laughing as she sent them packing. All

they needed to have done was look up, and they would have seen me.

People were saying farewells and drifting away. Kind elderly women hugged me and told me to keep my chin up. Then the hall was empty and larger. Glasses were scattered around on the furniture and there were ladies in the kitchen clearing up the food. Every noise was familiar and intrinsic to the house, which is always alive with people coming in and out. Old Mrs Bailey, the daily who, before she had her cataract done, ironed my father's shirts by feeling them. Sue and her children who sat watching the television in the hall while their Mum did the hoovering. Jane making the beds. Cari and Norma helping Dad in the office. Stephen in the garden, having to deal with Queenie, the odd job man who is a woman. At the centre of this vortex of activity is my mother; busy, chatty and eccentric. Feeding the budgie, knitting, organising the house, or writing a book. While I was on bail, I too had been part of the action. All these people had been my friends and had protected me as much as they could.

Engulfed in the familiarity of my home around me made me dread returning to ESP. It was nearing time to go back. Lily, Silvy and Dad went to Oxford for the cremation; our farewells were curtailed because they were already late. Mum and I sat on the sofa in the hall with a bottle of red wine, discussing what I would do after I was released. Mum offered me the chance to live in Granny's cottage. It was a dream come true. I loved the cottage, and had always adored going there when Granny was alive. I did not want to live in London, but in the country, near home. This was very near, and would be a safe landing for when I came out. Everything appeared to be falling into place. I would live in Granny's cottage and write my book.

A few minutes before we left, I had gone to the lavatory and crutched an ounce of Golden Virginia tobacco. The discomfort was lessened by the anaesthetic of alcohol.

We sat in the back of the car with more wine, giggling our way back to Kent, by which time we were both smashed. The sight of the prison wobbling before me was suddenly funny. We both got out of the car and swayed to the front door, much to the amusement of the women looking out of the windows. The door was opened by 'Stewpot', a young screw and one of the few sympathetic officers in the prison. My luck was in.

As she let me back inside, my mother tried to come with me.

'Excuse me, Mrs Johnston, you can't come in here,' said Stewpot, as she tried to push Mum out of the door.

Mum, in her confusion, was muddled between dropping me off at ESP and leaving me at boarding school in the old days. 'I just want to make sure she's all right,' was her hiccuppy reply.

'Mrs Johnston, I'm afraid this is a prison and you are not allowed to enter.'

There was a smile on her face.

After a passionate and melodramatic farewell, Mum climbed back into the car, and I was taken off for a strip-search.

Most of what happened next is a blur in my memory, and was reported back to me the next day as I nursed a whopping hangover. Apparently, after the strip-search (during which they failed to find the hidden tobacco) I was left wandering along the corridor in my dressing gown, which was undone. I was singing 'Love is a many-splendoured thing,' a song that I didn't even know that I knew. Sarah, who had seen me arriving back, was waiting for me at the bottom of the back stairs. She huddled me into the BBC room, before any other screws had a chance to witness the state I was in; I risked losing ten days' remission by coming back drunk. There we found Paulette, Janice and Za-Za, who sneaked downstairs to get me some coffee, to sober me up. I remember Sarah sitting in the corner

of the room doubled up with laughter, trying in vain to talk to me seriously.

I flaked out on my bed, and Sarah sat with me, as she had done when I was ill at Holloway, only this time, concern was replaced by amusement. When the fuss had died down, I opened a bloodshot eye and looked at her.

'Do you want to know what I've got?' I whispered.

'What have you got?' she whispered back, as if I was an idiot.

'Ssssh.' I sat up shakily and went to my cupboard. Looking furtively around, I removed the tobacco from where it had been all that time. 'This'll see us all right for a while,' I said softly, then, having placed it safely in my locker, I passed out until the next morning.

18

The day after my parole, my friend Michelle came back from her home leave in a dreadful state: she had pumped herself full of drugs. She had confessed to me on a previous occasion that she did not have any veins left that she could inject the drugs into, except in her foot and neck. Now her skin was grey, and the bags under her eyes were dark and puffy.

Soon afterwards Michelle was told that she had to return to Holloway. She was suspected of having AIDS. Holloway claimed to have made a mistake with some blood tests and Michelle had to go back for another check. When her dorm-mates came back from work, they found her bed stripped, and her area of the room being fumigated.

The subject of AIDS aroused violent reactions in all the inmates. The thought that they had been in contact with someone who might have the syndrome drove them into a frenzy of worry. For my part, I knew enough about the virus to know that even if Michelle did have it, the chances of her infecting another inmate were minimal.

Then, to everyone's astonishment, Michelle reappeared at ESP five days later. I asked her what had happened.

'When I got back there, they put me straight into isolation, didn't they. I never had a blood test or anything. Then this doctor came to see me and told me that I must be mad because I was imagining things; there was nothing physically wrong with me, it was just my brain. I asked her about this AIDS thing and she told me not to worry. Well, how can you say

don't worry to someone who's been told that she may have the virus?'

She was run-down and depressed. She didn't know what was going on and worried that this was another plot to isolate and scare her. Her return to the prison was resented by the other inmates who did not understand the nature of the disease. Once the rumour had spread, the stigma stuck. Even when Michelle was proved clinically clear of AIDS, none of the women wanted to go near her. Her spirits hit rock bottom. An outcast, she was suspicious of everyone; all she wanted was to get out of ESP. She told me that she had been offered a chance to go to a special rehabilitation home but that, for her, the offer had come too late.

'Nothing they try and do now is gonna make things better,' was her reaction. 'I ain't going.' I tried to talk her into going to the home – at least she might be cured of her drug addiction – but I could not get through to her: as far as she was concerned, things had gone too far.

Not long after my conversation with Michelle, she absconded with another inmate. Waiting for the first table to be called one teatime, nothing happened; the screws were talking to each other, looking at the list of names, and then shaking their heads. One of them left the dining room; still no tea. We waited for some time, then whispers started going around that someone had absconded. We waited while the entire prison was searched. I wondered what would happen; sirens, sniffer dogs, wailing police cars. The procedure was more prosaic than my imaginings had been. When their absence was confirmed, their names were scrubbed wearily from the list, and the women on the first table were finally called to go and collect their tea.

I didn't know if Michelle had absconded because she craved drugs, or because she wanted to be shipped back to a closed prison. Either way, her life at ESP had turned out to be as intolerable as it had been in Holloway.

Shortly after this incident, Sarah and I decided to try to improve our figures by going to the gym. There were two screws in charge of the gym. One, Miss Granger, was sun-bed brown and peroxide blonde, with a flashy sports car, which she used to leave strategically parked so that everyone could see it. She would jump into the car at the end of the day, whizzing past, scattering inmates and leaving the smell of burnt rubber in the air. She was not as popular as she'd like to have been. The other gym officer was a northerner called Miss Grantham, who was more dour in her appearance than the sybaritic Miss Granger. She was seen more often in her discipline uniform than Miss Granger, who preferred her skimpy shorts and gym shoes to A-line skirts and lace-ups.

As at Bullwood, there were two specific times that we were allowed to go to the gym, depending on what form of exercise we were interested in. The choice included circuit training, which consisted of a little bit of everything, weights, skipping, press-ups, sit-ups, trampoline and badminton. Sarah and I tried most options, but were not dedicated enough to match up to Miss Granger's form.

Evening classes were another diversion. Of the ones I had enrolled in I found calligraphy the most absorbing. I developed a passion for it and spent hours labouring over Gothic scripts. Our teacher was a Welsh man of infinite charm. The trouble he took to extract any sort of artistic talent from me was enormous. I managed to smuggle a bottle of indelible Indian ink into the dormitory (it was strictly forbidden to have anything of the sort upstairs) and would occupy myself for hours. Often, I would make a mistake on the last line of a poem or proverb I was working on, so I would have to start all over again. The other women in the class worked hard at it too. There was one whose work was superb; even the teacher stood back and admired it. She had never done calligraphy before but was on her way to being considered for the Koestler

Award, a prize given for the best artistic achievements of prisoners.

Another of the classes that Sarah and I went to was beauty care. This was taken by a genteel woman called Mrs Mason who sometimes had difficulties in controlling the more boisterous of the inmates. Mrs Mason showed us how to bleach a moustache; then we did a face pack, while she filed our nails. Beauty was a popular class, as it taught inmates what was best for their skin, hair and nails by letting them experiment with products. Most women tried to get to a class the week before their visit, so that they could paint their nails and cleanse their skin before the big day. Although I enjoyed the beauty classes, and they made us feel better, I knew that they were a luxury rather than a practicality. Whenever I had had beauty treatment on the outside, it had been very expensive; yet here were we, being pampered at the expense of the taxpayer, which seemed extraordinary considering that money is not made available for more practical classes, rehabilitation schemes, community service schemes or other non-custodial projects. However, having been in prison, I know how much classes like those are appreciated, how much they improve morale and what an outcry there would be if they were removed.

My name came up for the guitar lessons I had applied for. The head of the education block, Mr Madden, was the prison music teacher. He told me to come and see him at 5 p.m. one evening. When I entered his office, he was playing numbers from the *Rocky Horror Show* on a synthesiser. He handed me a guitar, and we played all the songs that we knew from the show. He had energy and charisma, and although our session lasted for just fifteen minutes, I enjoyed the crazy, spontaneous music. Before he bounced up to go somewhere else (he was always expected in three places at once), we arranged another time.

In the same way that playing the guitar had been a

bonus at Holloway and Bullwood, it livened things up in the dormitory at ESP. Sarah and I sat on her bed and sang the songs that we had practised in Cell Six. It was like a first night, when we sat down and played to people's faces instead of through walls after a bang-up. Although the distractions of the comings and goings made us more inhibited than we had been on our own, women from other rooms overheard and came in to listen.

Rumours were flying that a girl was about to be shipped out, as she was suspected of having smuggled drugs into the prison. Everyone was talking about men seen prowling around the grounds the previous night, wondering whether they were police, or someone leaving a drop. Snippets of gossip like these fascinated me, but Sarah always remained aloof. I knew that her shyness gave her a misleadingly cool exterior; that was her protection, in a way. It was as if she was unwilling to absorb anything to do with prison life. Although we were close, it was hard to imagine what would happen to our friendship on the outside, because we were so different. There was much I couldn't fathom about Sarah, and yet I thought she knew me inside out. There were times when she was almost childlike in her wish to be advised, and times when she was like a governess with me. Her temperament was a balance of opposites; it was as if she longed to talk to people, but at the same time was repelled by them. But she was Sarah, my prison partner, and I loved her because we were in it together.

There was one other woman with whom Sarah and I both made good friends. She was called Tania, and I met her standing in the letter queue. For some reason, the screw who was to hand out our letters was late. Those waiting for their missives grew restless. The woman standing behind me let out a torrent of words in foreign languages, one of which was Italian. I understood what she was saying, and laughed: she certainly knew her swear words. We started talking. Tania was Yugoslavian,

but spoke five languages fluently. She had worked for Agnelli's, and had travelled the world. Before that, she had been an air hostess. She was just over halfway through a four-year sentence.

I could hardly believe that this petite, attractive, well-spoken lady could be doing four years. Conspiracy to supply heroin was the charge, and there was no mistaking the bitterness in her voice when she told me what had happened.

She and her Russian husband lived in a small flat in Chelsea. At the time of her arrest, her husband was in New York. Two of his acquaintances were involved in bringing a quantity of heroin and cocaine into England. Not a condonable offence by any means, but Tania's only involvement was that she was aware of it, in the same way that I might be aware that a friend driving me home has had too much to drink. The men who were responsible for the smuggling were grassed up to the police by the ex-wife of one of them and they were arrested. When the police asked for their address they panicked, as the flat they were staying in was full of drugs. They gave the address of Tania and her husband instead.

Tania was alone when the police burst into her flat. They started ransacking it for evidence. She did not know that, by then, she had been earmarked an an accomplice in the crime. They took her to the police station where, after a gruelling 72-hour interview, she finally admitted that she had known that there was something 'going on', although she herself had had no part of it.

The two main defendants were shocked to discover Tania in the dock with them. They told the police that she had had nothing to do with it, and that she would never even have been implicated if they hadn't given her address to the police in order to cover up their own. One of her co-defendants she had never seen before. They were all remanded in custody to await trial. Twice their cases came to court at the Old Bailey, and the jury failed

to reach a verdict on their pleas of not guilty. During this time, a period of about thirteen months, Tania was in Holloway.

Eventually they were all found guilty at Uxbridge Crown Court, notorious for the heavy prison sentences handed out there; the two men were given twelve and seven years, Tania was given four.

Tania's bitterness was apparent, and understandable. She was witty and brave, but she never ceased to ask the questions 'Why am I here? What is this system they call justice?'

Tania was the only child of a well-to-do Yugoslavian family. During her first traumatic months on remand at Holloway, she was convinced that she would be acquitted when the case came to court. Her parents, who lived in Yugoslavia, were used to her being away for long periods of time, because of her job. She could not face telling them what had happened, so she sacrificed her visits in favour of a monthly telephone call. She used to ring them from Holloway, telling them that she was in Paris, Rome or Athens. Unfortunately, the case was written up in the Yugoslavian press. The next time she rang feigning a busy career life, they knew the truth.

Tania's anger was directed against the police. She maintained that it was because she was foreign that she was framed and bullied. 'They did not like to see me doing well,' she said, in her clipped, Yugoslavian accent. 'They thought that because I was once an air hostess, I must be a drug smuggler.' She had recently been told that she was coming up for a special parole review. Her first parole had been refused, but this review was being authorised by the Home Secretary. Perhaps it was a way of acknowledging a mistake without undermining the authority of the courts.

Tania was in a room which she shared with two other women. It was next to the BBC room, and as she did not smoke, Sarah and I used to go and sit with her after we

had had our evening cigarette. On the top of her locker were some bottles of standard skin cream and face lotion. Without thinking, I picked one up and smelt it. A waft of something unmistakably expensive and luxurious hit my nostrils. Tania giggled. 'The last time I went on home leave, I took the prison bottles with me, emptied their shit out and replaced it with my own stuff. Now I can keep my looks while they keep me in prison.' Poor Tania, her thirtieth birthday was coming up. She had been twenty-seven when the police burst into her flat. Tania was the one who told me about prison bollocks. I confided in her about being in love with someone I barely knew, who I was certain was the wrong person for me. 'Silly girl. You have to be in love with someone, otherwise there is nothing to dream about, nothing to long for. You carry on with your prison bollocks. When you come out, you will know what is right.'

At Sarah's suggestion I had applied for the vacancy coming up in the works department. The job application form had to have my reasons for wanting a work change, and a report from my present boss. I put my reasons for wanting to join the works party as 'I have always been interested in DIY.'

My application was successful, and now I was to leave the garden party and join the works the following Monday. I had to hand in my garden boots and change them for a pair of work boots, which were to be kept shiny and polished at all times. It was what Sarah and I had wanted all along. We waited for the weekend to pass; a non-visit weekend, which went even more sluggishly than such weekends had at Bullwood.

On Sunday, we went to Evensong. It was held in the local church, and we went as a part of an outside congregation. Someone had sent Sarah a copy of the *I Ching* which we had been wanting to experiment with, but couldn't, as we didn't have any coins. Before we

went to church, we were all issued with a paltry offering to put in the collection bag. I was given two 1p coins, Sarah was given one 2p coin. When the bag came round, we both put in our hands and jangled them around, then withdrew them still holding the coins that we had been given. Our escort officer was swaying around beside us, her head hanging on her chest. We got our coins to do the *I Ching* – not that either of us was proud of cheating the church.

As inmates were leaving and arriving continuously, two spaces appeared on the table next to mine. Sarah and I successfully applied to sit there together. On our new table, we met Joyce, who had only just been admitted to ESP from Holloway. Joyce was fifty, with jet-black curly hair, a hoarse voice and a dirty laugh. She was not happy with ESP, and was thinking of ways to abscond. I told her that we'd been through it, and short of losing twenty-eight days' remission, it was impossible.

'Fuck this, I'm right pissed off. I ain't doin' my bird 'ere.' She was doing a year. 'And let me tell you, it were worth it,' she said, breaking into a filthy chuckle. Joyce had been running an illegal nightclub or 'shebeen' in Southampton, which had made a great deal of money. 'I think I'll just sit back and think of this as me 'oliday,' she continued. 'Mind you, I'd 'ave rather gone to Ibiza.' I asked her whereabouts in Southampton her nightclub had been. She leant forward and narrowed her eyes. 'All yer 'ave to do is go to Roy's cabs. Any one of 'is cabbies will know where Joyce's is.'

Joyce had been put into the dorm opposite ours. That night she came in to see Sarah and me. She was wearing a pair of double-breasted black satin pyjamas, which I admired.

'Bleedin' authorities,' she grumbled. 'I got a lovely pair of black satin sheets to go wiv them and all, but was I allowed to 'ave em? Oh no! You'd 'ave thought I'd be doin' them a bleedin' favour and all.' In her hand was

a sheet of paper which she held out to me. "Ere, you're posh. I'm tryin' to do me jam form, but I ain't got the know 'ow. If you do it for us, I'll give you a rollie.'

A 'jam' form was an application for parole (jam roll); the inmate had to say why she thought she was eligible.

'I was goin' to say that I deserve me freedom as I provided a bleedin' good service for the public, and the sooner I'm at liberty to start it again, the better for all concerned.' She went off into raucous laughter.

I took the form from her and wrote something staid and obsequious, like 'I have realised the folly of my crime, and promise not to do it again.'

'Not to get caught again, more likely!' More raucous laughter. She had plans for a world-wide syndicate of shebeens. 'I 'ad lots of stars among me clients. There aren't no other clubs like Joyce's.' I didn't doubt it.

We had another visit that night, from a gentle Indian woman called Rani. She had thick tresses of shiny black hair that hung down her back. She was thin, with a kind, melancholy expression. Sarah and I knew her a little as she worked in the kitchen, and had to prepare our vegan meals. She always tried to save us extra fruit if she could. She was serving a seven-year sentence for smuggling heroin into the country. Rani's husband had been the mastermind of a heroin connection between England and India. With her quiet charm, Rani made a perfect courier. When she left India to come to England, she did not know that the bag she carried, given to her by her husband, was full of heroin. When she was arrested, her husband came to see her in the police station. He told her that if she gave his name to the police as the person who had given her the bag, their child would have to be brought up by relatives instead of a parent. She agreed not to say anything. The police tried desperately to get information out of Rani. They knew that she was a small part of a larger organisation. Because she would not talk, she had to take all the blame.

Soon after her arrest, Rani realised that her husband's family were under the impression that Rani was nothing more than a drug pusher, and were trying to take out an injunction preventing her from seeing her son. They wanted the son to go and live in India permanently. Despite everything, Rani still loved her husband, although he was often cruel to her when he visited.

On the night she visited us, she was on a rare high, floating in wearing a bright orange and gold sari, handing out shortbread that she had saved from supper. Usually Rani was withdrawn and dejected; hunched up on the window sill outside First Front, staring out over the woods and fields and crying for hours. When she was like that, it was impossible to get near her. The depth of her depressions worried everyone, screws and inmates alike. She was happy because she was expecting a visit from her sister the following weekend. She would dress up for the occasion in her black velvet trouser suit, kept always for her weekend visits.

The next day, I started my new job. I followed Sarah to the workshop when the first bell went. It was a large, well-lit room, with sawdust shavings on the floor. At the far end there was a group of men in the same brown dungarees that we were wearing. They were talking and whistling together.

'Morning girls! Oh look, we've got a new one.'

'They're always like this,' whispered Sarah. Our first task was to sit on a low wooden bench and polish our boots until they gleamed. I got off to a bad start, plastering my boots with polish without knowing what to do next.

A kind-looking man walked over to where we sat. 'Rosie, Rosie, Rosie, you won't get anywhere like that.'

I was silent with embarrassment.

'Rosie Lee,' he said, laughing. 'You polish it off with a brush. Honestly, what have we got here!'

He was to be my boss.

'My name is Mr Bird, and you're coming with me. I hope you've got a head for heights.'

'No problem,' I said, eager to make up for the boot-polishing disaster.

'Well, we're going up ladders today. Let's go then, Bob.' He was speaking to another man in overalls. Between them, they picked up a long ladder, and set off in the direction of the house, with me trotting behind.

Instinctively, I knew that I had done the right thing in changing jobs. From the first moment of working with Mr Bird, I felt that he was a friend, someone I could trust and enjoy talking to. As we walked we discussed our favourite musicals: *Oliver, My Fair Lady* and *South Pacific*. He told me that he and his wife were going to London to see *'Allo 'Allo* on the stage and he was looking forward to it.

He held the ladder against the wall for me while I climbed up. The two of them followed and we stood on the roof, inspecting something that looked like a piece of rotting wood. Mr Bird asked me what I thought of it and what, in my opinion, they should do. The furthest I have ever got in DIY is passing someone a hammer. I made a useless suggestion which they laughed at. It happened that they needed to return to the workshop to collect some tools that they needed. Mr Bird put the ladder over the side of the wall, and I climbed on to it, ready to descend. Before I knew what was happening, the ladder had slid from under my feet, and I was lying on the ground, having fallen twelve feet.

'Are you all right?' came a worried voice from above me.

'I think so . . . '

I tried to stand but I couldn't. Mr Bird and Bob came down from the roof, and with their help I got to my feet. I felt a throbbing pain all down my left side where my leg and foot had been twisted under the ladder. The two men half-carried me to the surgery where I sat with my foot

on a stool, waiting to be told the worst, but nothing was broken, just badly bruised. I was disappointed, since broken bones elicit more sympathy than bruised ones. In the surgery I read the notices on the wall: 'Constipation. How to achieve a soft, bulky, easily passed motion. Eat plenty of fresh fruit. Remember, it's the quality, not the quantity of the motion which counts.' Practically all the inmates suffered from constipation at one time or another.

I was banned to 'sitting-room rest', sitting in the BBC room all day. We were not allowed to smoke, and the more enthusiastic screws banned knitting. It was as if we had to do penance for daring to be off work. It was miserable and windy outside and I was beginning to feel groggy. I could hear Miss Bight giving the house-cleaners a hard time outside the sitting room. If we left the room for any reason, like going to the lavatory, we would certainly be told off. I wanted to be working, which was something I'd never thought I'd think after two weeks' garden duty.

The BBC room was next to the Senior Officers' office. Miss Wheeler was the most disliked officer in the prison. Being an SO, she was in a higher authoritative position than the other discipline staff. From the sitting room I could hear her barking at inmates, finding fault with the appearance of the women and bullying the younger officers. We had never crossed paths, for which I was grateful: she would certainly have found fault with my down-beat appearance.

Another girl came on sitting-room rest. She was black and young, her name was Joelle. Like many of the inmates I had spoken to, Joelle was in for importation of cannabis. She too had had the experience of seeing the amount she had brought in halve between being arrested and coming to court. We talked about sentencing and how arbitrary it was. Joelle and another girl at ESP had both smuggled the same amount of cannabis, but had received different sentences; I had encountered similar discrepancies at Holloway and Bullwood.

Joelle told me about two women at ESP, Martha and Lyn. Lyn was a heroin dealer, pushing drugs to finance her own heroin habit. Martha was a user, never selling drugs but buying them for her own use. When Lyn was busted, Martha was in her flat. They were both charged, Lyn with supply, and Martha with possession. When they came to court, they received the same sentence; when they came up for parole, Lyn was granted hers, Martha was not.

Of course it would be impossible to give statutory sentences for drugs cases, as they are all different; nevertheless, the diversity of sentences handed out for the same crimes astounded me. One person may be fined for possession of cocaine, whereas someone else arrested with the same amount may be tried by a different judge or magistrate and given a custodial sentence of six years. Offenders were always coming across other prisoners who had been given a greater or lesser sentence for the same offence, which does nothing for offenders' faith in the system.

In my experience, prison does nothing to help prisoners stop using drugs, and drugs are easily obtainable inside. Before her case came to court, my friend Caroline from Holloway had been through a rigorous rehabilitation programme in which she fought a lengthy and serious addiction. She received a two-and-a-half year sentence (the same as her boyfriend, who had not undergone rehabilitation). That she continued her fight throughout her time in Holloway was due entirely to her strength of character, not because the system offered her any help; there would have been many who, in her situation, would not have succeeded. If the problem of drugs in Britain is to be alleviated, offenders need to be helped to cure their addiction. Otherwise, for some, efforts at rehabilitation will be wasted; for others, their craving for drugs will linger and the cycle of crimes committed to sustain drug addiction – selling drugs, burglary, thieving and

prostitution are common examples – will be perpetuated when the offender is released.

Without offering rehabilitation, the law, when sentencing an addicted pusher to prison, is doing nothing to combat the drug problem. Offenders rarely reveal the source of the drugs, because they are too scared of reprisals, and when a pusher goes to prison, another is found to take his or her place. Sentencing these people might make useful statistics in the police's fight against crime, but it is only a short-term measure, doing nothing to solve the larger drugs problem.

Joelle and I discussed all this until lunchtime, when Sarah came to see me, and helped me to hobble to the dining room. Everyone wanted to know what had happened. 'Are you going to sue?' was the question everyone was asking. I thought of the look of concern on Mr Bird's face when I hurt myself. 'No,' was my answer.

In the afternoon, I began to feel worse. Not only was I immobilised, but I could sense a bout of flu approaching. The nurse put me on 'bed rest' which meant that I was not allowed to get up (except to go to the lavatory). My meals were brought up to the dorm. I was longing for a cigarette from my abundant store of tobacco. After supper, Sarah helped me to the loo, where we smoked an illegal rollie, lit from a lighter belonging to Joyce in the dorm opposite. Crouching in the loo with my bandaged foot, blowing smoke through the small gap of the open window, I was a sorry sight.

Next morning my flu was worse. There was a frightening gale outside. Through the window in the BBC room I could see the garden workers struggling along with their duffel coats flapping. From the corridor, I could hear Stewpot, the kind young officer, saying to another screw that she thought the winds were too dangerous for the women to work in. Trees were swaying and boughs looked alarmingly near to breaking, but Stewpot was alone in her efforts to spare the garden workers. The

gusts of wind were getting stronger and women could barely stand up to their force. Suddenly, with an aching shudder, one of the oak trees in the drive crashed to the ground, tearing up its roots and landing right in the middle of the officers' car park. There was a phenomenal roar; a mixture of searing winds, crashing wood and twisting metal. A gaggle of screws came out of the front door. Pushing against the wind, they went to inspect the damage. I watched them try and move the branches of the tree to see whose car lay beneath it. The car park became surrounded by people trying to help. The garden workers, farm girls and the works party crowded round to see what had happened. No one could hear themselves speak above the noise of the gale. Everyone was shouting and waving.

The garden workers were sent back to their duties, even though other trees looked as if they might fall. Branches were flying through the air, the greenhouse was swaying so violently that its occupants ran back to the house for safety. It was madness to send women back to work in those conditions; yet refusing to work meant losing remission. Later, at tea, the garden workers told the other inmates how frightened they had been. White-faced and windswept, they were upset and indignant that they had not been allowed to spend the afternoon in the house.

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My spell in the sitting room lasted for the five days of the working week, and cost me dearly at the next canteen. The following Monday, I resumed my position with Mr Bird, as 'the chippie's mate'. My arrival back in the workshop was greeted with more than the usual amount of teasing.

'So, brilliant on ladders, are we? Heights are no problem, eh?' All the works men roared with laughter as Sarah and I polished our boots. Mr Bird and I went off to change some locks. I couldn't help thinking that it was an odd thing to be learning in prison. There wasn't much for me to do except pass him the tools, and tell him my life history.

Never have I met a more sympathetic and less judgemental man. He spoke with no hint of moral superiority, but tried to understand the way I was, and why I had ended up in prison. He talked to me about his family, what books he liked and how he wished that he had learnt more when he was young. He told me little about the details of his job, although I tried to wheedle information out of him. His philosophical way of looking at things was a perfect balance for my mercurial temperament.

He enjoyed my uselessness at the job: he loved standing back, looking at what I'd done and shaking his head. 'Rosie Lee, I think I'd better do this.' He knew it would make me furious. If the weather was decent he took me for walks down to the lake. That we were so different, and that our lives had no meeting place except for ESP, made no difference to our friendship.

I told my parents about Mr Bird in a letter that I wrote. When my mother replied, she said that often a diamond sparkles in the mud. My diamond was Mr Bird – as well as Sarah and many of the women that I had met in the months that I had spent inside.

On the works party our bosses were more relaxed, and the work was better paid than the garden work. I was also glad to be with Sarah.

I found out that when Sarah and I arrived at ESP, someone in authority had said that we should be separated. I have no idea why. I cannot say who decided this or who told me that it had been said. The reason that I had got the job on the works party was that the person who had decided that we should not be together was away on holiday, so unable to veto certain job changes.

Before Easter, the bad weather faded. The mild air brought signs of renewed life; woodpeckers hammered at bark, and the trees in the Weald showed tentative green buds. It all spoke of optimism and growth. Mr Bird, or Birdy as I called him, took me walking with him through the woods. Down by the lake, with the sun on the leaves and my hands in my pockets, I could see the end in sight. Just under two and a half months, and I would be walking through the woods at home, away from the noise and rush of the prison. I took a kinder look at the prison: a walk like this would never have been possible at Bullwood or Holloway. Yet mellowed as I was by the presence of spring, the lurking feelings of frustration were never far away.

Birdy asked me what was wrong as I had become silent, thinking about the paradox in the loathsome beauty of my surroundings. He understood when I told him.

'Come on Rosie Lee, cheer up. Not long before you'll be out, and I'll still be here. It's all right for you lot, coming and going as you please.'

He loved sayings, and usually found one for every occasion. 'Can't see for looking,' was a favourite, when

we couldn't find a particular drill or Rawlplug. 'We've got a lot to do and a little time to do it in,' was another, as we set off for the morning job, me laden down with his enormous toolbag.

Without wanting to admit it, I was becoming dependent on Birdy. I was like a caged animal at the zoo, finding a special visitor to feed it. Sarah and I protected each other within the cage, but Birdy was a contact outside, which made my friendship with him different. I looked forward to work, especially if it was a job where we could be on our own, so that we could talk.

We were given the task of setting up a mini-office at the top of the stairs where the letters were given out. Birdy loved the job, as we were in the heart of prison life, outside the SOs' office, and opposite the BBC room. We could see who was on sitting-room rest, who was summoned by a SO, and we could make faces behind the backs of the screws that we didn't like. We had to carry long planks of wood from the workshop, through the front door and up the stairs. I was always at the back, and wildly out of control with the planks. I bashed them against the wall, or nearly decapitated people as they walked past. My reputation in the workshop was a joke, especially after the incident with the ladder.

While we were on this job, the officers' orderly used to make Birdy cups of coffee. Being an inmate, I wasn't allowed anything as grand, but I used to plead with Birdy to let me drink his. Sometimes he let me have a sip, but I knew that he thought that doing so was compromising his position. One day he left his coffee on the window sill, and went to fetch a tool from the workshop. While he was gone, I finished the cup, knowing as I did it that it was a stupid thing to do. When Birdy came back and discovered what I had done, he was terribly upset. I had known that that would be his reaction, yet I had still drunk the coffee. I did not know why I had done it, and tried to cover up my shame and guilt with nonchalance.

'It's the same as stealing, or breaking someone's trust in you. I thought you were different.'

My remorse was painful, more so because I had known what would happen. It was as if he had been testing me by leaving the coffee, and I had betrayed both of us by drinking it. For three days, Birdy barely spoke to me, and I was miserable. I hated myself most of all, and wished that I had never met Mr Bird. The loss of his friendship made me recognise how much I valued him.

He obviously wasn't going to bring the subject up, so I realised that it was up to me to clear the air. 'Birdy, please don't be angry. I'm sorry about what I did, and I promise not to let you down again.'

He relented, and was soon back to his old self. Birdy's kindness and easy manner made him popular with everyone. He had become used to working in a women's prison, and little ruffled him, although he sometimes looked a bit bemused at the language we used.

There was a girl on the works party known as Mad Mo, convicted of burglary; she worked with Mr Steel on the sewers. She looked streetwise and tough-talking, but nothing she said made sense; she didn't even appear to be sure of her own name or age. It wasn't that she was a psychiatric case, but screws and inmates alike were aware that Mo was a bit 'funny'. We were all wary of her and her flashes of temper. When Sarah and I were new to the works department, she ignored us, but she liked Birdy, and often came over to talk to him. He tried hard to concentrate on what she was saying, but her words tumbled out in strange order and it was hard to decipher their meaning. She would make statements like, 'Yeah rass no cunt on de streets robber girl . . . ' which made Birdy raise his eyebrows. Mo was assigned to painting and decorating as the assistant of a fat screw called Miss Portland, or 'Porty' as she was known. Porty asked Birdy if she could borrow me to help paint a room that they were doing up to be another dormitory. To my

horror, Birdy agreed, and I was packed off with a pot of paint and a brush to work with Mo.

Inside the room was a piece of mobile scaffolding, and ladders propped up against the walls. We had to sandpaper all the wooden surfaces, then wipe them down with a cloth. Maureen moaned throughout, because she was bored, and wanted to get on with the painting. Her cropped hair with a floppy bit at the top framed her angular face and staring eyes; a diamond shone in her front tooth. Her crazed expression stopped her from being attractive – the look in her eye was enough to put anyone off. When we eventually began painting, Mo and I climbed the scaffolding and started sloshing white paint on to the ceiling. Mo got over-excited, and without warning, brushed the side of my face with paint, screaming with hysterical laughter. I didn't know what to do. We were a long way from the ground on a wobbly piece of apparatus. Mo was expecting me to join in the fun, and was waving a freshly dipped paintbrush in the air. I didn't want to be punched in the face for being a wet blanket, nor did I want to lose my balance and end up with a broken arm. For once, the sight of a screw walking into the room was a relief. She shouted at us both to stop and told us to come down from the scaffolding.

Later that day, I was standing in the dining room talking to some new admissions who had just arrived from Bullwood. Unknown to me, Mo was creeping up behind me with a pot of paint and a brush. I sensed something and turned round, to be met full in the face with a glob of white paint. She had taken the risk of smuggling the paint out of the room just to throw it over me. Before I had wiped the paint from my eyes she was gone, shrieking and bellowing down the passage. Back in the workshop Birdy put the fact that I was covered in white undercoat down to my being a general disaster to work with.

The next day I returned gladly to Birdy. He decided

to turn me loose on my own, and I proudly put up a no-smoking sign by myself. Every hole I drilled, Birdy would say, 'That's a pretty fine hole,' then stand back to admire it. I became handy with an electric drill, and even learnt to use a countersink. He tried to teach me how to use a hand saw, but I never became very good at it.

One afternoon, Diane, with whom I had shared a table, came to use the telephone. It was during working hours, so she was taking a risk, especially as the phone was next to the Senior Officers' office. Birdy and I were moving a piece of plywood and could not help overhearing the conversation. She got through to her husband, then started to cry. 'Michael, what's going on? Why did you call me Jane? It's her again, isn't it? I want to know what's happening.' She carried on like this until her units ran out.

The effects of imprisonment on relationships were, like crime, sentences and the offenders themselves, varied and often extreme. At ESP there were more women than at Bullwood and at Holloway whose partners had no idea that they had committed an offence punishable by imprisonment, such as fraud. In many of these cases the husband or lover could not accept seeing his woman inside. Families and friends who reacted badly did not encourage the shocked partner to stand by his wife or girlfriend. Women who had been 'in it' with their husbands, boyfriends or lovers did not suffer much from lack of support; often, their partners would be doing time as well. When that happened, they were allowed an IPV (inter-prison visit), one of them going to the other's prison, depending on which was more convenient. There were women whose marriages were unhappy on the outside, for whom custody made no difference to the state of the relationship. But for a large number of women that I talked to, the sexual restrictions that went with being in prison

gave rise to terrible suspicion and subsequent break-ups in family life.

Sex, or rather lack of it, was one of the major causes of tension in each prison that I went to. In Holland, at a prison in Alkmaar, they have introduced a sex cell which couples may use during visits. The prison officers report that it has reduced frustration and homosexuality, and has helped relationships between families to stay strong. It is of course only established partners who can use the sex cell. The Dutch are not afraid to provide the logical answer to a serious problem.

Perhaps the worst separations were for women with young children. Most of the mothers I met were fiercely maternal and proud of their youngsters. They longed for the visits when they would be able to hug their child, although for many, it was a trauma to see their child within the grounds of the prison, even if it was only for a visit.

Women who were pregnant prayed that they would get their parole so that they would not have to spend the first few months bringing up a child in prison. Although any births are now taken to an outside hospital so that the name of the prison doesn't have to appear on the birth certificate, the baby may, depending on the length of its mother's sentence, spend its first nine months in prison. After that, mother and child are separated, and the child is left with the father, relatives or in care. Holloway and Styal, another closed prison, had mother-and-baby units. Bullwood and ESP did not. Several weeks before the birth, the expectant mother would be taken from a prison without a mother-and-baby unit to one with such a unit.

I became quite friendly with Diane after the telephone call. She was large, and had big sad eyes. Her husband's unfaithfulness made her miserable, as did being in prison at all. Her offence was a good example of the many economic crimes that I came across, although her story was more pathetic than most. Diane had wanted a bank loan, but had been told that she could not get one unless

she had been employed by her present company for five years or more. She had only been working there for eighteen months, but decided to lie, and secure the loan. Her company then collapsed, so she couldn't pay back the bank loan, and the insurance company investigated the claims. They discovered that because Diane had lied her insurance was invalid, which made her liable for charges. In the end, the bank and the insurance company between them decided to drop the charges, but the police insisted that they should go ahead. Diane was given a year.

Diane did not have a 'criminal mentality', although what she did was wrong, and therefore had to be punished. Her probation officer had recommended that she do community service, and pay back the loan at the same time. Instead, she was removed from society, and the loan was not repaid. It would surely have been more constructive and appropriate for Diane to put right her mistake, and stay at home with her husband and children at the same time.

It was nearing Easter, and many of the evening classes were taken up with making cards and Easter eggs for the inmates' families. I had managed to join a cookery class with Diane and her friend Liz, who were decorating eggs that they had made from melted chocolate with piped icing. I was no good at things like that, so I made a tray of chocolate-covered shortbread for us to eat at the end of the class. There was an older woman in the class called Doris. She was making a marzipan basket which she was going to fill with small coloured eggs for her grandchild. It took her ages, rolling the lumps of marzipan between her palms to a smooth oval shape. The eggs were higgledy-piggledy, the dye was blotchy and the basket was wilting in places, but Doris was determined to enter it for the Koestler Award. She had already entered three poems and two pictures, none of which was very good, but she lived in hope that the award would be hers.

In my calligraphy class, we were illuminating alphabets for cards to send to our friends. I had sent my mother a card on Mother's Day; it was my first attempt at an entire verse in Gothic script, made up by me. The poem went:

Darling Mum this is to say
I miss your ugly mug.
But the thought of your dear
Football cheers me
Up while I'm in jug.

The other women thought that I was mad or rude. Their cards were full of proper sentiments for their mothers. 'To my dear mother on this special day, thank you for all you have done for me.'

On Mothering Sunday, Sarah and I went to church, which was a short walk from the prison; the corpse of the unfortunate babe Arabella was supposed to be buried there. It was always the same inmates who chose to go to church: Sarah and I (although not every Sunday), Doris, who was probably praying for her Koestler Award, Linsey, a skinny dyke in her sixties, and Liz Joy, the nosey woman from the laundry. She had rubbed me up the wrong way on several occasions, by insinuating that we were both upper class and therefore better than the other inmates. If anything was printed about me in the papers, she tried to corner me and ask questions. Once I told her to mind her own business, to which she said, 'Don't worry, I'll find out everything about you in the end.' I thought that she was a bit creepy.

As we entered the church, with our escort screw, we must have looked an unappetising lot. Sarah and I were both wearing our leather jackets for warmth, which made us appear aggressive, and the others looked cold: prisoners, all of us. From where we sat we could see all the mothers with their children, goading them gently into singing the songs they had rehearsed for the

service. The pianist went slowly, smiling at the children and encouraging them to keep up. The children couldn't help staring at us, then looking away again if they thought we had noticed. I wondered if they thought of us as 'those funny women from the big prison'. The emphasis was on families and units, which increased our sense of isolation; the gaggle from ESP did not fit in.

20

The Friday and the Monday of the Easter weekend were bank holidays. With Mr Bird away, I had a lot of time to kill. Sarah and I had both started to do overtime at weekends for the works party, and over Easter Mr King, one of the two heads of the works, asked Sarah and me to repaint a room in the clock tower which he wanted to use as an office. It was a secluded room, with a window that looked out into the courtyard. We could see who was coming and when. We borrowed Joyce's lighter, and had secret fags up there, listening to our headphones and taking it in turns to keep watch. We were paid 6p per hour for our overtime, which was a fortune each week at canteen.

On Easter Sunday, a local religious sect came to the prison with presents for the inmates. They were known as the 'spotty people' because of their polka-dotted head scarves; they were viewed with suspicion by the inmates, as their community chose voluntarily to live in seclusion from the outside world, with no electricity, telephone or newspapers. The luxury that they did allow themselves was a minibus, which enabled them to do their charity work. After we had had our lunch, we were ordered to remain seated. The spotty people filed into the dining room, the little children dressed as bunny rabbits and fairies, being guided by their matronly seniors. They paraded through the hall, singing as they went. Each child handed a prisoner a paper Easter egg that they had made themselves, stuffed with home-made biscuits. A young boy thrust one on to my lap. It was decorated in

crayon, and had the words 'Leonard, aged six' on it. The children stared at us, just as the others had done on Mother's Day, curious and wary, as if they would like to touch us, but didn't dare. Grateful as I was to have the biscuits, I was imbued with the same sense of discomfort. I hated to imagine the spotty people discussing us with their children: 'Come on now, Gareth, we must do something for those poor women . . . '

At around this time, a friend of mine also thought that he would like to do something to help. One morning, there was a great commotion. A van had parked outside the front door, and a man was lifting a grand-looking hamper from the back. Inmates rushed to the window.

'Cor, I wonder what's in there! It's about time we 'ad some decent nosh . . . '

Someone came into the dining room. 'It's from bloody Fortnum and Mason's! I just saw the label on the 'amper.'

'The bleedin' Governor's overdoin' it a bit this time, ain't 'e?'

Later on, I was summoned to the Gun Room. There, with my name on it, was a Fortnum's hamper, delivered all the way from London. The screw wiped the smile off my face. 'You will not be allowed to have any of its contents. Really, where do people think you are – a health farm?' However, each item had to be checked and signed for: black cherries in Kirsch, wild boar pâté with walnuts, Seville orange marmalade with Cointreau, after-dinner mints, and so on.

'It would be a kind gesture to donate this hamper to charity,' suggested the screw. I refused to donate it to charity, purely because I was suspicious that 'charity' meant the officers scoffing the lot in the staff room. The hamper was repacked and lay tantalisingly in the corner. It would have made a wonderful 'drop' but my friend would have had to remember to include a tin-opener. In the end, I handed the hamper over to my parents when they visited.

* * *

Things were looking up slightly with my romance. A letter had come from T which was a far cry from the one he had sent when I first arrived at ESP – which, I could now see, was not really as standoffish and unfriendly as I had thought. He had sent it the moment he had found out about my transfer, just to say that he hoped I had settled in. Before I left Bullwood I had written a letter full of questions which I was expecting him to answer – about the books I was reading, the thoughts I was thinking. He had sent a reply to Bullwood, which was why it took some time to catch up with me. He had taken the trouble to try to answer my questions, and had also said that he would visit me on his own. I had asked him to.

On the day of his visit, I was a wreck. We had two and a half hours on our own: what on earth were we going to talk about? I was as nervous as I had ever been before an exam; I wanted to appear to be lively and sure of myself. As for my appearance, I spent hours in front of the mirror trying to find a flattering look. My hair had grown since he last saw me, so I pinned it up with a comb, hoping to look seductive.

As the visiting hour approached, women crowded into our dorm to watch visitors arrive. I stood by the window, panicking, half hoping that something would go wrong and that he wouldn't turn up. At 1.30 p.m. a motorbike appeared on the drive. I knew it was him. As he stopped, I waved from the window. 'Cor, is that your visit?' someone asked. 'I thought all your friends wore 'ead scarves, and drove Range Rovers!' There was laughter all round. T's arrival on a motorbike did something for my prison 'cred', if nothing else.

I went down for the pre-visit search, shaking and white as an invalid. Soon we were sitting at a table, chatting away like normal friends, laughing and at ease. My nerves dissolved as did the two and a half hours.

As we talked, I thought, 'This poor boy is too nice to be

the subject of more prison bollocks. Forget about it and just be thankful you have a good friend.' It was easier said than done, but I tried my hardest not to put T into a romantic light any more.

After T's visit, Sarah and I realised that it was only a matter of weeks rather than months before we were released. We began to talk of nothing else, as we had done before the appeal, only this time, there was no doubt about our freedom. It was now a question of lurching from visit to visit until 5 June.

Activity was the only way to keep our minds off it, so we tried to attend a class every evening. The one I enjoyed most was called 'bits and bobs', and was taken by Mr Bird. Sarah and I were both wrapped up in the backgammon boards we were making. We measured, painted and varnished for hours, while the other inmates gossiped and bickered around us. Joyce, the nightclub owner from Southampton, was halfway through a chessboard. Liz Joy was making a photograph frame. Liz Joy was disliked by everyone in the class as she insisted on telling everyone how she thought they should do their projects. Most of us ignored her, but Joyce was not given to suffering in silence, and bawled at Liz Joy whenever she came near her. Mr Bird tried to defuse the situation but was unsuccessful.

The other woman that Joyce had it in for was Viv, a new admission from Holloway serving three years for conspiracy to supply cocaine. Viv was attractive but neurotic, and destined for a tough time in prison. The rumour got round that she had turned 'Queen's evidence' at her trial, thereby getting away with a far shorter sentence than her co-defendants. To add fuel to the fire, she was also supposed to have grassed someone up at Holloway, causing the other woman to be shipped out. These rumours festered for a while, although Viv was aware of the animosity against her. She was put to work in the kitchens, as was Joyce,

who had already poisoned all the other kitchen workers against her.

It was difficult to avoid the bitchiness. Kelly, in our dormitory, was a friend of the girl that Viv had supposedly got into trouble, and was out for revenge. Joyce despised Viv's coquettish ways and wanted her taken down a peg. Both of them warned Sarah and me not to talk to her. We ignored them, as she was quite harmless, just self-obsessed. She was proud of the publicity that had surrounded her case, and often quoted the fact that she had been referred to as a 'beauty'.

To annoy her, Kelly praised Sarah's looks in front of her. 'I reckon you got the best body in the nick,' Kelly would shout to Sarah at bedtime. 'No one else is a patch on you, hen.'

Viv always betrayed the jealousy she felt, much to the amusement of the others. She was refined, and hated the more sordid aspects of prison life. Joanne, who had moved into the bed next to Viv's, used to talk for hours, spouting fountains of the most debauched monologue imaginable. Her shrill tone made it impossible not to hear.

'Cor my fanny itches . . . think I must have crabs again. Mind you, I was always clean on the game . . . never had more than four Johns a night. With some of them I used to slip a Valium into their drink so that I could rob them, or get away with a hand job.'

Joanne's beat had been the rougher end of the Edgware road. We tried to warn her about AIDS.

'Nah,' she said dismissively. 'Like I say, it ain't never more than four a night.' Joanne was in for cheque-book fraud, but had every intention of going back on the game when she was released.

Mabel in the corner became a very dear friend. She always claimed to know nothing about anything, remaining detached but cosy at the same time, like a nanny. She never volunteered information about herself, but I sat at

the end of her bed one evening, helping her unravel some wool. I asked her what she was in for. For many years, Mabel had been the companion-cum-housekeeper of an old man, who was approaching senility. Before he died, she said, he gave Mabel £12,000 which she put into a building society.

After he died, his children decided that Mabel had taken advantage of his declining mental health, and forced him to give her the money. Mabel tried to defend her right to what, according to her, was a gift, a reward for years of loyalty and hard work. She offered to return the money, which was sitting intact in the building society, rather than be dragged through proceedings that she didn't understand. Her offer was rejected, and she was prosecuted and found guilty of extortion. She was given a custodial sentence of eighteen months.

In contrast to Mabel, there was Susan, a glamorous fifty-five-year-old grandmother, who had fiddled thousands of pounds from the DHSS. She and her much younger husband had been all over the world, driven Rolls-Royces – she had even had a face lift at the expense of the government. Susan didn't regret what she had done. After all, she said, they had had a good time, done all the things she would never have done otherwise.

Then there was Frankie, a skinny but masculine sixty-year-old. She had just been told that her request for parole had been rejected. Frankie was one of a number of women who, having spent most of their lives in and out of prison, did not care about her knock-back. She admitted to me that as she had nowhere to go outside, it was a relief to know that she was going to be housed, clothed and fed for the next few months.

At the other end of the social scale, there was snooty Liz Joy. She too did not want her parole when her review came up the following year. 'What could I do out there?' she said matter-of-factly. 'Here I have no bills to pay, no responsibilities to assume, which someone of my age

might find hard to take after so long inside.' Liz had her niche at ESP in charge of the laundry, and one of the prison's senior citizens. She was in command of herself, and did not want to be thrust into the real-life problems of the outside world.

This mixed bag of convicts made it increasingly difficult to work out what the role of imprisonment should be. One might argue that if there were people who felt safe and protected within the system, it should be made tougher and harsher to prevent them from seeking such refuge; but, given that many of the women did not feel in any way drawn to a life inside, but had had their world on the outside shattered by their convictions, making life harder would solve nothing.

There was little violence at ESP as we were Category D prisoners, and had supposedly been assessed for our non-violent behaviour. But some incidents did occur, mainly as a result of the petty arguments and rumours which erupted amongst so many cooped-up women.

The atmosphere in the dorm was tense; part of the cause was the fabled ghost, Arabella. There was no denying that the house was eerie, especially at night, with the creakings and groanings of the wooden floorboards. Some of us used to speculate on what the noises might be – the nanny coming back to the nursery to purge her guilt, the mother trying to look for her baby's body. Most of us were excited rather than terrified by the stories, but Hilary, the woman in for baby-battering, was truly scared, and used to clutch her Bible all night. Because she herself was unfriendly and rude to the rest of us in the room, we reached the stage where we were deliberately baiting her. She hid under her blankets and swore at us, saying that we were in league with the devil. She got her own back by making as much noise as she could early in the morning, long before the first bell went. She rustled paper bags, slammed her locker door and creaked around the floorboards for ages, waking everyone.

Viv, who worked in the kitchen, became hysterical about Hilary's routine. 'Would you mind not making so much noise? I have to do early shifts in the kitchen, so I would appreciate a lie-in . . . '

Hilary ignored her until Viv sat up in bed one morning and called her a selfish cow. Hilary insulted her back, and a full-scale slanging match ensued, with everyone else in the dorm sitting up in bed to see the action. Hilary screamed that we were all prejudiced, and had had it in for her since she arrived. Kelly joined in by saying that she had never been prejudiced against black people, she just hated people who wouldn't let her sleep. I tried to arbitrate by saying that no one hated anyone, but perhaps we should all try a little harder to get on. Hilary turned on me and said that I was the worst of the lot with my upper-class accent and rich friends.

'Now look who's prejudiced,' I shouted, before I could stop myself.

Viv put her oar in. 'If we're going to start dragging people's life histories into it, then at least we can all sleep peacefully knowing that we haven't beaten up our children.' There was an ominous hush before Hilary leapt forward in her nightie and slapped Viv around the head. Viv tried to fight her off, but Hilary hung on to her hair.

'I love my kids,' she shouted. 'You don't know nothing, you evil woman . . . you like the devil . . . ' She let go of Viv's hair and ran screaming down the stairs into the hall. Viv ran after her, determined to have another shot. The rest of us stared at each other. Suddenly, it was difficult to know where to place our sympathies. I thought of Hilary's reaction when Viv had taunted her about her kids: she was right, none of us did know anything. Whatever had happened to Hilary before her arrest, whether or not she had hurt her children, she was suffering in a way which none of us could understand. I did not like her one bit, and she had been the first to turn on me, but there was

something about her which made me think that she should be left alone.

Hilary applied to move into a different dormitory, but there was a long wait before another bed came free. The truth was that no one else wanted Hilary in their room. She was unpopular throughout the prison, even with the other black girls, the majority of whom did not share her violent racist feelings.

Not long after that, Kate, the young girl in our dorm who was suspected of being a grass, became the centre of another violent occurrence. The night before she was due to be released, she was told by an inmate that she was wanted in the BBC room. It was customary to be ragged or dipped in a bath on a last night, and Kate went along thinking that she was in store for a bit of fun. The moment she entered the BBC room, the door was closed behind her, and the light was switched off. She was grabbed from behind and slapped in the face. Someone else kicked her in the leg. Voices shouted, 'That'll teach you, you fucking sneak,' and 'Don't think you're going to get away with it, arsehole.'

After her ordeal, she was pushed out into the corridor. She returned to the dormitory shaking with fright, her face blotchy from crying. Sitting on her bed, trembling all over, she told us what had happened. Although Kate was capable of being a pain in the neck, neither I nor anyone else in the room thought she deserved to be treated like that. Being beaten up had taken any enjoyment out of going home the next day. She could not think that far ahead.

Zayib was furious that someone as defenceless as Kate should have been subjected to such a horrific attack, and forced her to say who the ringleader was. It turned out to be Denise, the gap-toothed girl whom I had worked with in the gardens. She had been hauled up for having an illegal lighter, and had been convinced that Kate was responsible for the grassing. Zayib went at once and told

an officer about what had happened. Her anger made her determined to see that Denise should not get away with it. Unfortunately, the screw whom she told was Miss Bight, who said that there was nothing they could do, as the fight had not been witnessed by a screw. 'We will keep an eye on Denise from now on,' she said noncommittally.

It was common knowledge that Denise had masterminded the attack against Kate. She did not regret her action. 'About time someone sorted the little bitch out.' What made it even more pointless and cruel was that after Kate had gone, the grassing continued just as it had done before.

Although bitchiness and bickering were endemic to life at East Sutton Park, there was not much lesbianism compared with the prisons that I had been in before.

Some women were known gays, but dormitory life made it harder for them to have sex. The most notorious lesbian was called Sharon. She was in love with a pretty blonde housewife called Peg, but everyone regarded it as a crush, as Peg appeared to be happily married.

One afternoon, an elderly inmate rushed down to the Gun Room to fetch an officer, as she thought there was someone drowning in the bath. The bathroom door was locked, and she could not get a reply from whoever was inside. The screw ran upstairs frantically searching for her master key. They burst in to find Sharon and Peg *in flagrante* on the floor, which provided the prison with much teasing fodder.

21

Sarah and I were beginning to show signs of gate fever. We had a small church diary which we had been given at one of the services we went to at Bullwood. There, we had waited until the end of the week to cross off the days, taking it in turn to mark off the seven days that we had done; now we were checking off the individual days; every morning, first thing, the diary came out of Sarah's locker and we gloated over the fact that it was weeks, not months. Sarah was being released on 3 June and I was going two days later.

Whenever a prisoner left, there was never any resentment on the part of the inmates who had been refused their parole, or those who knew that release was still a long way off – or if there was, they did not show it. For the women who were preparing themselves for the outside world, the knowledge that they were soon to be free incited many different reactions. The symptoms of gate fever varied from snappiness and tension to elation, singing, skipping and shouting, Sarah and I had bouts of hyper-excitement when we couldn't keep our fingers still; we had to fiddle with something to keep our nerves steady.

Because open prisons are meant to be more of a preparation for the outside world than closed ones, there was noticeably less fear attached to the pre-release build-up at ESP than there had been at Bullwood and Holloway. We had been allowed to use a telephone; we had been out in the fresh air more; and we had become used to walking around without waiting for doors to be unlocked. These were the obvious steps forward to being released,

as well as the facilities for day parole and home leave. But even an open prison was still a prison, and therefore a world away from real life. The important things that faced an inmate on release were to resume responsibility for herself again and to make her own decisions. These things a prison, no matter how open, does not teach. The problem with rehabilitation schemes within prisons is that the prisons don't view themselves as a part of a rehabilitation service for the offender. Aspects of work and education are considered important, but neither has any specific number of hours allotted to it, and if there is a staff shortage, these elements are the first to suffer. Help for drug addicts, alcoholics, gamblers and so forth varies from prison to prison and, yet again, is subject to staff availability. Prisons do not run formal 'rehabilitation' courses.

As far as open prisons went, ESP was considered a joke by women who had been to the other one, Drake Hall (there was Askham Grange as well, but that was a hostel scheme). There, they said, the atmosphere was more relaxed, the screws kinder and the inmates happier. It is difficult to know if these reports were unbiased, or whether Drake Hall was seen in a kind light because of its contrast to East Sutton Park.

Perhaps one of the most irritating aspects of being in this so-called open prison was knowing that those for men were better. Sarah's boyfriend at Ford, in Sussex, spoke of the 'cushy' time he had had there, with ample time to read and be by himself. There was none, or far less, of the paranoia and suspicion of the screws hanging over them.

Perhaps women were 'worse' prisoners than men. From every account, bar the men I had heard from in Scottish prisons, I gathered that our male counterparts managed to do their bird with considerably less aggravation than women. Later, I raised this subject with male officers who had worked in both male and female

prisons. They confirmed my suspicions that, in general, men tend to settle down quicker and take their sentence more in their stride than women. I wondered whether the difference in behaviour had something to do with the menstrual cycle. Women who are cooped up tend to get their periods at the same time: not always, by any means, but it happened both at my boarding school and in prison. It is a medical fact that many women suffer from terrible pre-menstrual tension, depression, cramps, pains and so on. I am not suggesting that this is the only reason for volatility in female prisoners but I am sure that it didn't help, and exacerbated some situations, which otherwise might have been defused.

There are no more than a few male discipline staff in female prisons: there is always the danger that a male prison officer might arouse temptation on both his part and the prisoners'. It might be that a male presence would help ease the tension that builds up between so many imprisoned women. Working in the works department in the company of men, I was certainly relieved to be away from the female staff and I found it soothing to be away from women for most of the working day.

It was the pettiness amongst other things that drove us mad. One morning, Sarah and I were walking past the dining room; on the table by the door there was a loaf of bread which had not been cleared away. Sarah grabbed it, and stuffed it down the bib of her dungarees. Too late: she was spotted by a screw, who was walking very fast towards us. Sarah started to walk fast too, but a strident voice called her back.

'Where do you think you're going with that?' she shouted.

Sarah slowed down, but didn't turn round. She was laughing.

The screw stood behind her, with her hand held out. 'You'd better hand it over this instant. It is a report-able offence to take food from the dining room. Don't

try and tell me that you didn't know, it's been said often enough.'

Sarah controlled her laughter and handed the bread over.

'As it is the first time I have caught you doing it, I will not put you on report. You,' – turning to me – 'have been told before not to roll your dungarees up in the house. And you haven't fastened your braces properly. Don't let me catch you like that again.'

Trivial though it sounds now, then we were affected by the pettiness, as was every inmate. Being shouted at and pestered when we were powerless to do anything about it beat us down and ate into us all.

Mum and Dad were revving up for my release. One Sunday afternoon, I was expecting them to visit with a friend, George; Sarah and I were eating our lunch when a crowd of women rushed to the window, yelling and pointing. "Ere, there's some geezers 'avin' a picnic!' someone shouted. Looking out, I could see three people sitting on the grass beyond the car park holding paper plates. In front of them was a basket out of which came a hunk of cheese, French bread, cold chicken and a bottle of wine. It was my parents and George, thoroughly at home, tucking into their picnic as if they were at the Henley Regatta.

The bull-like Senior Officer's face froze. Marching out of the dining room she called for Mrs Walsh, my 'house mother', to deal with it. Seconds later, Mrs Walsh wheezed her way to where they were sitting, and began talking very fast. Mum and Dad looked startled, then began putting things away into the basket. Mum stood up with the same smile that she reserved for the most disliked of my teachers at school, apologising graciously through gritted teeth. Around me, inmates were hooting with laughter. One of them recognised my mother from the last time she visited. 'I bet the old bag's telling Rosie's

Mum that this is a prison, not a bleedin' 'oliday camp!' It was typical of Mum and Dad to think that they could guzzle their picnic and wash it down with Sancerre in full view of the prison staff and inmates.

Mrs Walsh marched back into the dining room to report to the SO. She nodded in my direction. I tried to look serious in case I was about to be in trouble, although I couldn't see how they could possibly pretend that it was my fault. The visit went ahead. Mum and Dad apologised; they were worried that they might have got me into hot water. 'She was very cross, that screw,' Mum said. 'She told us that it was a prison, not a holiday camp.'

As much as visits helped me to stagger through each fortnight, I was finding them harder, not easier, to cope with. Sarah and I both found that our visitors were almost more excited than we were about our approaching release. They were always asking, 'What are you going to do?' I got face ache from smiling all the time. It was as if I wanted to put my head down and do the last stretch of my sentence without being disturbed.

We tried to keep ourselves as busy as possible at the weekends. I continued to be engrossed in calligraphy, and was designing the menus for Clara's wedding, which was set for 4 July. On Sundays we went to church. We had some deliciously warm weather in May, and walking to church through the lanes bursting with cow parsley and valerian was one of the better aspects of life at ESP. One Sunday, a small group of us were driven to a parish church a couple of miles away. After the service, we were to have a long walk back. Sadly, the screw accompanying us was the zealous Miss Bight. Amongst our party was the elderly Liz Joy and Frankie, who was also in her sixties. There were two jolly over-weight Nigerians as well, in full traditional dress. On the way back, Sarah and I walked together, slightly in front of the others, picking flowers from the hedgerows and talking about freedom. I bent down to do up my shoelace.

'Rosie and Sarah, you're too far in front. Please stay with the rest of the party,' Miss Bight called out to us.

There were only a few yards between us and her, the two Nigerians were struggling some way behind. Our path was uphill, and the two fat ladies were having difficulties. Sarah and I carried on walking at a normal pace, deep in conversation.

Miss Bight turned on us. 'Must you persist in ignoring my orders?' she screamed. 'Do you want me to put you on report for absconding?' We tried to explain that we had done nothing deliberately, we hadn't even been aware that there was any distance between ourselves and the rest of the walkers.

'You were deliberately trying to pull away from the escort group,' she continued, ignoring us. 'You will carry on walking where I can see you at all times, and hear what you are saying.' We stopped talking.

When we arrived back at the prison, Miss Bight stopped us by the back door. 'One of you picked something up after the church service. I will have to search you all.' It was difficult to know whether she really thought that I had picked something up, or whether she was giving us a hard time for the sake of it. Ever since our house-cleaning days, Sarah and I thought that Miss Bight had taken a personal dislike to us, although we did not know why. Perhaps she thought we had an insubordinate gleam in our eyes. For most of the time we stayed out of her way, but she was making it impossible to avoid her now. I lost my temper with her.

'Who do you think picked up what? Shall I answer that question for you? You think it was me. Well, go on, have a search, see what goodies you can find.' I held out my arms.

Miss Bight looked at me as if I was a piece of dirt. 'One of you was rummaging around in the hedge on the way back from church. You will all be searched in turn.'

'Miss Bight, we both know that you suspect me of

having done something. Well, why don't you search me and let the others go?' She didn't reply, but motioned us to form a line. She searched us all, leaving me until last. She went over as much of me as she could, since it wasn't a strip- or internal search: she turned out my pockets, looked up my sleeves, ferreted around inside my shoes. I exaggerated my acquiescence by being scrupulously polite; putting my head far to one side so that she could check my ears, opening my mouth as wide as it would go, so that she could search every corner. She was thorough, without saying a word. She didn't find anything, but she still held the winning card: she was an officer, and if she suspected anything, that was good enough for her to believe that I was guilty of something. In this case, I think that she suspected me of picking up drugs from the hedge and that she had put the others through a search purely to make me shoulder some guilt. She let me go, silent and watchful. It was as if she wanted to say, You may think you've got away with it, but I am looking out for you. Without delay, I went to one of the Senior Officers to make a complaint about Miss Bight.

The SO said that it would have been easy for me to arrange for something to be left in the hedge.

'But I didn't,' I shouted. Did they really believe that I could arrange to pick up a parcel when I had no idea where the church was or how we would get there? It was incomprehensible.

On Monday, I poured the whole thing out to Mr Bird. I was worried that there would be repercussions, as I had made a fuss about Miss Bight's ridiculous behaviour, and in doing so, had been rude to the SO. I was scared enough to think that Miss Bight was trying to make me lose remission. Birdy tried to calm me down by reminding me how near I was to my release date. But that was what was worrying me. I couldn't help thinking that something was going to happen to prevent me from going home.

We were still working on the office structure by the telephone. Halfway through the morning, Miss Wheeler, the SO, the terror of the prison, came up the stairs, followed by Sarah. 'I want you in my office now,' she said to me as she walked past. Behind her walked Miss Bight, her lips pursed. Birdy patted me on the shoulder as I followed Wheeler into her office. This was it, I had been right.

The accusations started. 'Who do you think you are, going off on your own like that, against the express orders of your escort officer? Do you realise what concern you have caused Miss Bight? You selfish girls don't realise what a difficult job she has to do.'

I couldn't stop myself. 'Miss Bight's job is difficult because she chooses to make it so,' I said.

'How dare you!' Wheeler was apoplectic. 'Miss Bight has told me what happened yesterday. She saw one of you pick something out of the hedge. She found nothing, and you deny it, but I have the word of my officer, which I choose to believe. You are both rude and insolent, considering the way in which you are treated here . . . '

Again, my response slipped out. 'If you want to talk about the way in which we are treated, Miss Wheeler, then I will tell you that the officers at Bullwood did a far better job under far worse conditions than your staff could ever hope to do. You would all do better to stop pestering and picking on us.'

Because they had found nothing to prove their erroneous theory, we were not put on report. She dismissed us, spluttering with anger. Outside, Birdy was waiting. I told him the good news, that no remission had been lost; the bad news was that my hackles were up to such an extent that I knew I was going to have an outburst. At that moment the Governor walked by. I grabbed him by the sleeve.

'I am warning you that I suspect one of your officers of having something against me. I don't know why, or

what caused it, but if anything fishy happens between now and the time of my release, I will call in the National Council for Civil Liberties for legal advice, as I wouldn't put it past her to plant something on me.'

He tried to shake me off, but there was no stopping me. He was grinning as usual.

'If Miss Bight has a personal vendetta against me, I would advise you to be very careful.'

With that I let him go. There was a round of applause from the BBC room. The women on sitting-room rest had heard my tirade and were showing their approval.

Birdy was sitting on a workbench, wiping his brow. 'I thought you were going to explode there, Rosie Lee,' he said.

I did not see Miss Bight again. The next day I was told she had gone to Portugal.

During our morning breaks, we sat on the workshop step in the courtyard, our faces turned to the sun. When we tidied the workshop, we took the dustbins round the corner to a tip, which was out of authority's way. There, amongst the weeds and the rubbish, we found a heat trap, and sat for as long as we thought we could get away with.

More women absconded. One of them, a Chinese girl, took nothing with her, no clothes, possessions or money. I imagined her walking along the lanes until dawn, then collapsing in a ditch.

I lay on the Governor's lawn at weekends, listening to Van Morrison.

We're going to dance,
We're going to stay out all night long
And then we're going to run across the fields
Baby you know how I feel, when the healing has begun

I imagined the fields at dawn, soaked in a dew under a lifting mist. Cocooned as we were, Sarah and I relied on romantic and unrealistic views of what lay in store for us.

The first thing that we knew we were going to do was to go for a holiday to our house in Tuscany. After that, apart from knowing that I wanted to write a book, I had no other plans. Without a degree or any typing skills, I was unqualified for anything. Sarah was thinking of restarting her modelling career – to make money, she said, so that she could finance herself in some other area of business. She certainly looked the part: there was no fat on her at all, and her skin and hair bloomed and shone. Her resolve never to get involved with drugs again appeared to me to be unshakeable. It would be a struggle for her, returning to the same scene which had caused her downfall all those years ago, but she was now nearly twenty-two, and I thought she was strong enough to be able to put her new-found resolutions into practice. We discussed the possibility of sharing the cottage that I was going to live in, but she would have no transport and knew that she would have to base herself in London. I didn't like the idea of Sarah being in London, although I couldn't put my finger on the reason. I had made the decision already that I would never return to London to live. The country was where I wanted to be, away from the lures and temptations of the city.

We wondered how our time in prison would affect us, when we had returned to 'normal' life. Would our characters have changed? Would we both now be mature and capable citizens with an altered perspective on life? Was that what a prison sentence was supposed to achieve? What would others' reactions to us be? Were we to be labelled as ex-cons for the rest of our lives?

Something must have changed as a result of it all, but we didn't know what. Perhaps the 'something' would manifest itself on the outside. Was it prison that changed

people, or was it people themselves? I had read Chris Tchaikovsky's book, *Criminal Women*, and thought about the way she changed: in her case it wasn't the prison which brought about anything constructive, it was something that came from within.

Sarah and I had reconstructed our past, and tried to map out a future. We were naïve and optimistic, wise and apprehensive at the same time. While other prisoners were more pragmatic about their futures, we expected glorious things to happen, convincing ourselves that we would win in love and work; we just did not know how it would all come about.

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My final visit was twelve days before 5 June, my release date. Lily, one of my older sisters, came with three friends. Without realising it, she shattered my pipe-dream romance.

I casually asked if she had seen T.

'Oh yes, he's got a lovely girlfriend . . . '

I didn't listen to the rest. I kept my smile in place, although I wanted to cry and shout my jealousy through the dining room. One of my friends had brought in a bag of fudge; it wasn't allowed but none of the screws had checked to see if he was carrying anything other than cigarettes. The sun was streaming in through the window, and I watched the fudge dissolve into a gooey mess. Never have two and a half hours gone so slowly. My conversation was a meaningless gabble.

When they left I returned to the dormitory and sat on the end of Sarah's bed. She guessed immediately that I had had news of T. Even though I had tried to forget about him in a romantic context, it was the death of the dream that hurt most.

At work, I told Birdy about my unrequited love. He tried to soften the blow by finding fault with T, although he had never met him. The more he tried to put me off him, the more I came to T's defence, so that didn't work. A part of my plan to be the golden girl of the future had already gone wrong.

To make it worse, Sebastian, my co-defendant and former boyfriend, had announced his engagement. He had been released from prison a couple of months earlier,

and had gone to live in Germany. It wasn't that I minded about Sebastian – we had ceased to be lovers years before, although we remained great friends; it was the reports in the gutter press that I had been 'jilted, and left to languish in prison' that annoyed me. The inmates who saw the papers showed their sympathy. I told them that it was bunkum, and that I was very happy for him, and not in the least bit upset. They refused to believe me, and thought that I was being brave. They thought that Sebastian must be cruel, but they'd got the wrong end of the stick. But whichever way I, or the press, looked at it, my love life was a disaster.

Sarah's wasn't much better either. Ron had come to see her as soon as he had been released. The visit was a disaster. He had arrived an hour late. I waited with Sarah as she scanned the gates of the prison, praying that the next car that drove through them would be his. His lateness was worse than that of people who have never been in prison and do not know what agony each minute is when a visitor is late. Sarah was depressed after Ron had gone. She couldn't help loving him, but worried about the kind of future they would have together.

These warnings of the real world still did not penetrate our fantasies for a new life. T would split up with whoever she was, and ride off into the sunset with me on the back of his motorbike; Sarah and Ron would live happily ever after.

Since I had started working with Birdy, I had come to think of him as my adviser and mentor. His sanguine manner and cheerful face lit up the tunnel before the end came in sight and we laughed and talked together like uncle and niece. I loved Birdy because of his kindness. He was protective towards me, as if he thought I was vulnerable. He used to tell me to ring him up or write to him if ever I had a tricky patch on the outside. We knew that we would never meet again. Birdy had worked with hundreds of inmates, who had stayed with him for varying

lengths of time. He had been sad to see girls go in the past, and I knew that he would be sad when my turn came to walk through the gates. I had never thought that there would be anything to miss or regret about being released from prison, but the thought of leaving Birdy made me sad. I was going to miss him terribly. We were not separated by a criminal offence or a prison sentence. Being so concentrated, our friendship was the most important thing to me then, along with that of Sarah. Prison friendships are intense, because there are no distractions. Outside, there would be endless distractions, and Birdy felt that he would have no role in my life when I left.

I was fond of the other men on the works party as well. Sarah's boss had the dirtiest sense of humour. Once, when they were writing their monthly report on the women in the works department, he shouted out, 'I told the Governor that Rosie was good in bed. Well, she's so bloody useless at everything else, she's got to be good at something!' Even my methods of cleaning the workshop caused ribald comments from the men. They imitated the way I picked up a wet cloth, between my thumb and forefinger as if it was a smelly sock. They said I treated a broom as if it was a shooting stick. I played up to it, because it made Birdy raise his eyebrows and scratch his head.

I wanted to be sure that when I left, Birdy had someone to work with whom he liked. There were some women who wanted my job who I knew would not be right for him. Denise, the officer's orderly, and the girl responsible for the punch-up in the BBC room, were interested in being the chippie's mate. I liked Denise, even after her attack on Kate. She had got a total knock-back on her parole and had to do another year. I recommended her to the head of the works department, and her application was successful. Denise had a lot of problems, and I often saw her crying after lunch, with a letter in her hand. She talked to Birdy,

and I think he thought that he could be a proper friend to her as well.

About a week before I went home, people were seen prowling around the prison grounds during the day: shadowy figures who ducked away before anyone could get close to them. During the night they came close to the building. The police were called and they were hounded out. Zayib, in our dormitory, heard footsteps running down the stone path outside our bedroom window. The figures grew bolder, and showed themselves as reporters. They lurked by the back gate, trying to question the garden workers about me. One day there was a glaring headline in the *Daily Mail;* 'Rosie's mother rails judge!' There followed a story about how my mother thought that the judge in my case had been sadistic, and how, as a result of what happened to me, she warned youngsters to lie to the police. It was a popular story with the inmates. Women gave me thumbs-up signs in the corridor, and applauded my mother's attitude to the pigs. What I couldn't understand was where the story had come from. Mum wasn't in England: she had been in Italy and was due to return any minute.

When she returned, I rang her. Poor Mum had been on the cross-Channel ferry where she had seen a copy of the *Daily Mail*, with herself as the major headline. The paper had printed extracts from an interview in *Woman's Own*. The so-called interview was the result of a telephone call several months earlier when Mum had been at the end of her tether with journalists ringing up and knocking at the door. A writer from *Woman's Own* rang up and said that they were printing a story about me. When they told her what the contents were going to be, Mum flipped. Her anger was against the police and the judge who sent me to prison. Her anger with me was lost amongst the press coverage. In her efforts to protect me she sometimes came across as too exculpatory, but between us, she did not lose sight of the fact that having been involved

with drugs, I had committed an offence. It was how the offence was dealt with that wore her down. We both knew that the press attention was going to get a lot worse before we could hope for peace.

The *Daily Mail* re-opened the media obsession with the case, and reporters flocked to the prison. The inmates found it all very exciting. It was a link with the outside, a chance to flirt and be in the newspapers. The garden girls got the most out of it, as the press hung around the back gates throughout the day. The women had their fun: 'Rosie's gone and lost three month's remission. She ain't comin' out yet,' and 'She's done a bunk, so yer wastin' yer time tryin' to get a photo of 'er. Why not take one of me instead?' One of the women must have said something nice about me, because a tiny snippet appeared in the *Sun* the next day saying that although I was 'posh' I was popular with the other inmates. The journalists would never have thought up anything like that.

The authorities were getting jumpy about the attention being paid to me. The SO called me into her office to hand me over two official-looking letters. She asked me to open them in front of her, as she thought that they were offers made by the media to sell my story. They were letters from two friends wishing me luck on my release.

The authorities were worried about the threat to 'prison security', a nebulous term that was never properly defined. I didn't know what it was that specifically worried the Governor and his staff. As for me, I was safe from the clicking cameras, but only while I was inside. The excitement in the prison was building up towards 5 June. Every day women reported the arrival of a fresh batch of journalists. Not only did I have to cope with the thought of adjusting to freedom: now there was this hoo-ha as well.

Birdy thought that the whole thing was a hoot, and teased me nonstop. 'I drove slowly through the gates this morning, I thought them out there would want a good

look at the man who taught Rosie Lee to drill holes.' He tried to make light of my departure. 'Well, Rosie Lee, after you've gone, I won't have anyone to wreck my good work, will I?'

That Tuesday, it was Sarah's last night. Neither of us could sleep, so we sat up whispering until dawn. We knew that it was the end of our friendship as we knew it. We planned to see each other on the outside, but nothing would recreate our intimacy as it was then. Gate fever, nerves and excitement exacerbated the sadness that we felt at leaving each other for separate lives. When we were sentenced at Oxford Crown Court six months earlier, neither of us had thought that there would be any reason for melancholy on the night before leaving. Now I can see that we were scared that things would not go as we hoped they would when we were free.

Sarah had been through Reception that day, and the clothes she was to wear were hanging up in the office. It wasn't clear why it was necessary to do that; maybe they thought we would try and smuggle out messages from inmates to their families or lovers. In the morning, when the inmates went to dress in Reception, they were not allowed any contacts with the other prisoners after they had walked out of the Reception door. If they did accidentally touch someone, then the whole procedure of strip-searches and clothes-checking had to be repeated.

On Wednesday morning, Sarah and I had a quick fag in the loo to calm our nerves, and then went down to sign the register, Sarah in her dressing gown. We waited for the breakfast bell in the record room. At 7.45 a.m., Sarah went into Reception to put on her clothes. I waited outside in my work clothes, to say goodbye before she left. Out she came, and I rushed forward to hug her. I was wrenched away from her by a screw. 'Don't touch her!' she hissed. Already, Sarah was on the other side. We smiled at each other,

silently saying thank you. She walked on, and neither of us said a word.

After she'd gone, I was relieved. One of us had made it. The work bell went, and I was engulfed in a stream of inmates on their way to work. The men in the workshop teased me about missing my friend – 'Ah, she's all alone now . . . ' – but they stopped when they saw how quiet I was. Birdy and I hoisted a ladder over our shoulders and headed off to erect a partition in a room by the staff dining room. We chatted away, and I bullied him about wanting a going-away present. Without a word, Birdy brought a packet of sandwiches from out of his lunch-box. They were chocolate spread. 'I did bring you these, Rosie Lee,' he said. We had two each. I was honoured that he had given me a present; when I pestered him for sweets, I never thought he would really give me anything - not because he was stingy, but because he was employed by the prison, and was not supposed to.

Offers from the media were pouring in. Every day Mum was forwarding letters from the papers asking me to sell my story. Before I had gone to prison, similar offers had been made, wanting what they thought would be juicy scandal about drug-taking in Oxford, so it didn't come as a surprise; but the sums of money being bandied about were frightening - just for my story. I didn't reply to any of them. The crowd of journalists outside the gate was enough to give me the heebie-jeebies. I looked at myself in the mirror. What kind of a photograph would that bedraggled shrimp make? Well, if they wanted me in the newspapers, I was going to try and look my best.

There was a girl called Tamsin who had been a hairdresser on the outside. I asked her if she would do my hair. We had a trial run on Wednesday night in the Butler's, me with a towel round my neck, Tamsin with the scissors that she had signed for. Before she started cutting, she poured some liquid into a plastic mug. It looked revolting, and I hoped that she wasn't going to

put it on my hair. 'Quick, drink this,' she whispered. I did; it was gin. It burnt my throat and went up my nose, but I downed the lot. 'It'll do yer nerves good,' she said. I giggled, as soothing weightlessness spread through my body. 'What do you want done to your hair?' asked Tamsin, holding wet strands of it up in front of the mirror.

'Whatever you like.' I was miles away. She did a good job, and I returned to the dorm sozzled, and with a new haircut. I collapsed on to Mabel's bed. She smelt my breath and pronounced me drunk, to the delight of the others. Before I knew it, women were jumping on to the bed and tickling me. I spluttered and crawled my way over to my bed and clambered into my pyjamas. I got into bed and slept. The next day was my last.

Thursday. I had to do the Reception process in the afternoon. I dreaded it, but it was the first major step towards my release, and had to be done. Then there was the much worse ordeal of saying goodbye to Birdy. The property-checking dragged on, but we got through. I was told that I was entitled to a clothing grant. If prisoners need new clothes, they are taken to the store cupboard where the clothes are kept. They are bought by officers with an allotted amount of money. Therefore, they were cheap and not at all attractive. I took a pair of cotton trousers, a polo neck, and some knickers.

I then went over to the tower to lay out my tea. It was usual for inmates to buy biscuits with their canteen money and provide a tea for the works men on their last afternoon break before being released. I had made two cards, one for the men on the works party, and one for Birdy. The first one I put out with the biscuits, the second, I gave to him myself. The caption with the babyish picture was, 'Come on, we've got a lot to do and a little time to do it in.' I had drawn a round, red-faced girl in dungarees, struggling with a huge toolbag. Inside, I thanked Birdy

for being my friend. He didn't say much, just thank you. I knew he wasn't given to loquacious speeches at moments like that. As the tea bell went, Birdy drew me aside. He had made me a card too. On the outside was a horse's head drawn in biro. 'It's the only thing I can draw,' he said. Inside, he had written a poem which told me to keep my head up, and not to get into trouble ever again. While I was reading it, I sensed the hot prickly feeling around the eyes that comes before a good cry. I flung my arms around him, said goodbye, then ran to the dorm, where I cried into my bedclothes. I could not explain it to anyone. I knew beyond doubt that I was going to miss him very much, and that I would never have a friend quite like that again. It was the finality of the farewell that made it hard.

Tania, my Yugoslavian friend, sat with me. She knew why I was sad, as she worked with the men and had seen my closeness to Birdy; but she told me to think about where I would be at 7 p.m. the next day . . . Tania had heard that she was moving to Askham Grange and was relieved to be leaving ESP although she had still heard nothing about her parole. She had wearily accepted that she was unlikely to be released before January. At supper, I had a sing-out, similar to the one at Bullwood: 'Good luck, good 'ealth, God bless you . . . ' The first time I had heard a sing-out, I had thought, soon it'll be my turn. This time it was.

After supper, some women came into the dorm to wish me luck. 'Don't you come back!' and 'If I ever see your face again, it had better not be 'ere!'

The dorm was quiet, unlike my brain, which would not rest for a minute: 5 June was not yet real, and until the second that it was, I couldn't believe in its significance. I was on the threshold of all the plans and dreams that Sarah and I had formed within the seclusion of Cell Six. Insulated within the half-world of prison, we had barely given a thought to failure. Suddenly, I wasn't

sure if I was ready to be responsible. What if nothing had changed, and everything was the same as before? It was as if I was expecting everyone else to be as affected by my prison sentence as I thought I had been. These doubts and reservations made an edgy mixture with the elation of leaving an institution which had frustration and bitterness as its corner-stones.

'What are you going to be doing this time tomorrow?' whispered Mabel, in the early hours of the morning.

'Dunno. I'll be tucked up in my own bed though.' I would be able to get up and raid the fridge, go to the loo without being paranoid because of the smell of dope, run out into the garden in my bare feet. It would be so good. It had to be.

The morning crept through the darkness. I was up and pacing around before the first bell went. My dorm-mates were awake too, looking through the windows to see the figures prowling around in the morning mist. I couldn't tell if they were journalists, or screws checking for journalists. Whoever they were, they had something to do with my departure.

The first bell went, and I went down in my dressing gown to sign the register, and to meet Tamsin, who was going to give my hair a last seeing-to. I thanked her for the shot of gin. She wouldn't tell me exactly how she had come by it, but dropped hints about people connected with the prison who were not averse to making the odd fiver every now and then. However, I knew that it came from women who smuggled money in on their visits. The men on the works would never have put their jobs at risk.

The dining room was noisy. Everyone in the prison knew that there were strange men wandering around the grounds. Through the windows, we could see screws in the gardens with walkie-talkies. My heart was thumping. To the prisoners, it was an exciting joke. I was terrified. It was too reminiscent of the days after my arrest, and

I knew how the press were capable of hassling and crowding in on their target. Women were patting me on the back and saying goodbye.

At 7.45 a.m., I was summoned to Reception to put on the clothes that I had left there overnight. In my vagina, I had several rolled-up pieces of paper which contained the few jottings I had made at ESP. They went undetected during the strip-search, and I was allowed to put on the leggings, belt, jumper and boots in which I was to face the outside world. I signed documents which I was too nervous to read. One said that I was not allowed to be in possession of or in the company of people possessing firearms for five years.

A screw came into the office. 'It's bad out there,' she said. 'There are hundreds of journalists outside the gates. We've arranged a police escort to take her through; whoever comes to pick her up can come right up to the front door.' We walked out into the hall. Prisoners were still shouting and waving goodbye, but from a distance; the partition was already down. My property, packed in dull brown bags, was gathered around me, as if I had just arrived in London to seek my fortune.

A car came down the drive; in it was my sister Silvy, and our great friend Tessa who had volunteered to come and pick me up. Mum had thought that it would be better if she was waiting at home for me when I arrived. The car stopped outside the front door, while I was in the Gun Room, being issued with my discharge grant of £75, the remainder of my private money, and my unemployment benefit forms. The screw wished me luck, and told me not to come back. The front door opened, and I walked out into the fresh air.

As Silvy hugged me, a loud cheer went up. Every window on the first floor was cluttered with faces, the inmates, geared up by the excitement, had turned out to give me a send off. Silvy waved up at the women, with tears in her eyes.

Birdy appeared in the doorway. He too had come to say goodbye. I was overcome with joy and emotion. The moment I had been waiting for since that bleak day in December was infused with a sadness which I would never have imagined. 'Goodbye, Birdy,' I said. One of the screws pushed him out on to the steps. 'Go on, give her a hug.' He hugged me awkwardly and then let me go.

A policeman drew up on his motorbike. 'You'd better get going, the other escort is waiting down the drive.' With a final wave, I got into the back of the car. Silvy got in beside me, her arms around my neck. Tessa blew me a kiss in the mirror, and put her foot down.

The motorbike went in front of us. As if easing our way through a parting wave, we inched through the hotchpotch of clicking cameras and flashing bulbs. I stared ahead with my head up, determined to enjoy my first moments of freedom. Men were tapping notebooks against the glass and calling my name. There was a crunch as we drove over a foot. There had been a crash earlier, because of all the vehicles crammed into the narrow lane. The police escort left, and we were on our own, to drive as fast as we could away from the convoy of cars following us. By the time we got to Chertsey, there was only one left, on a motorbike.

I had to stop to go to the lavatory, because the pages of my diary were lodged in an awkward position. The only lavatory we could find was in the station. My first pee of freedom was memorable purely because of its squalor. The loo was blocked and there was no paper. My months at Bullwood had rubbed off on me, and I went without a qualm. As I emerged, a man approached me on the platform. 'Excuse me, but I'm from the *Daily* . . . '

'Excuse ME,' I replied sweetly, 'but any statement will be given out this evening by my solicitor.' (I had been told by Tessa to say this.)

'Oh come on,' he wheedled. 'You know that's not good enough.' What did he mean? Good enough for what? For

me, them, the public? Disgusted, I got back in the car, and we battled on for home.

All I remember of the journey is crying with happiness to be out at last. Silvy had brought a basket packed with tangerines, sweets and cigarettes. Already ESP was fading into a kind of parenthesis, a lifetime diminishing in size. Birdy would start work with his new helper, and the routine would grind on without me.

We were home in three hours. As we approached Shellingford, my stomach lurched, like going over a bridge too fast. I felt as if there was someone else inside my skin, while I was floating around somewhere, glad not to be a part of it. Police, magistrates, judges, probation officers, screws, inmates all bowed out of my vision like the last scene in a grotesque pastiche. In front of me was a barrage of press, hovering for a scoop. As we drove in, they surged forward, just as they had done at ESP and countless times before that.

'Give us a smile, Rosie! How does it feel to be free?' I didn't know, I had no idea.

We drove to the back of the house, followed by a pack of photographers. The back door was opened, and I ran in, without looking behind me. Mum and Dad were waiting in the hall. Without a word, we hugged each other, overcome with joy and relief. It was over, I had done my stretch, and was back with the family I loved. The press badgered us for pictures but we barely noticed. Inside the house, the last day had been crossed off the chart, and there was only the future ahead.

Epilogue

Over three years have passed since I was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment at Oxford Crown Court. At times, I have felt so far removed from the experience that I can hardly believe that it happened. At others, the prisons, their inmates and staff have been disconcertingly real – a sound or smell can take me instantly back to the world I was so glad to leave behind. Whatever my mood, I know that certain changes and effects were wrought upon me, of which some were temporary, others still remain.

For the first few days after my release, I couldn't cross an empty street unless the little green man on the traffic-light told me to. I went to a supermarket with my sister and nearly died of fright when she tried to barge the queue because there was a reporter behind us. I drove my car everywhere at thirty miles an hour, even though there is a national speed limit on our country lanes. However, these signs of authoriphobia soon wore off, and I was left with the difficulty of being a normal person again.

At my sister Clara's wedding, three weeks after my release, the whole family was on a high, celebrating Clara's happiness and my freedom. But after all the excitement my euphoria turned into a prolonged anti-climax. Because I thought I had changed, I expected everyone else to have changed as well, but life was exactly the same, with the same arguments, jokes, priorities. Sometimes I thought that I had been through an experience that had separated me from other people; at others it was as if my time in prison had made no difference to my life at all. If people behaved strangely

towards me I was never sure whether it was because I had been in prison or because I had been in the newspapers. My acclimatisation was similar to the transition one has to go through after returning from a long trip abroad: you feel that you have changed because of the things that you have seen or done, but find it difficult to assimilate those changes as you return to normal life in a world that is ostensibly the same.

Inadvertently, I was looking for guidance from others but found none, as no-one knew what I felt or what I wanted. My readjustment was made harder by the press interest. For a while everyone wanted to know me – people I had never heard of professed to being my oldest friends – but so many reactions were the same: 'Tell me about the funny bits, were there any lesbians?' Others found it difficult to talk about it at all. To my friends' surprise, and mine, I did not make much effort to see them. The idea of a party terrified me, London I found oppressive and daunting. Most of my friends were understanding; they saw that I could not explain my muddled reactions to the outside world. Others were hurt that I did not ring. Those close to me knew that under the party-piece charade, things were not easy. For Mum and Dad, it was harder to understand. Their happiness at seeing me home was almost greater than mine in being there. These confusions were worsened by a sense of guilt. I had a wonderful family to welcome me back, friends to support me, and none of the social or economic difficulties that would inevitably be facing my fellow prison inmates. Yet the golden future of my Bullwood dreams was obscured by shadows of self-doubt.

I was still hoping for an apocalyptic vision of what was going to happen to me. For three months I lost my motivation and sank into uncertainty. It was easy to say that I was going to write a book, but every time I sat in front of my typewriter, the sheet of paper remained blank. When the words finally began to emerge, I knew

that it was going to take much longer than I had originally thought. Nothing was going the way I had hoped.

Slowly I began to realise that although my life had changed, I hadn't really changed at all. I was still impulsive and pig-headed. What had changed was the way in which I thought I could find happiness: my attitudes, priorities and ambitions. Perhaps what I had thought of as 'change' was part of the natural process of growing up which had been accelerated by going to prison. The problem was that a part of me had gone with this process, and the other still lay locked in childish insecurities. I am still not sure what made those first few months of freedom so complex, although now the uncertainties have evened out, and I am able to be more objective about the time that I spent in prison.

Gradually, I began to see less of Sarah. Immediately after our release, we went on holiday to Italy with another friend of mine. There, our friendship had to adjust to very different pressures from the ones we had dealt with over the previous six months. I found myself to be possessive of Sarah, and jealous when she and my other friend got on well. We both felt strange lying in the sun, free to eat, drink and swim when we chose. Away from the dungarees and flat caps of East Sutton Park the hermetic seal on our friendship began to break. It wasn't that we were any less fond of each other, but it was inevitable that our friendship would change.

Sarah moved to London, where I had no desire to follow. There she began to see Ron, her older man, again. Once more, she fell under the spell of his energy and charisma and her resolve to renounce drugs for good crumbled. Like my attempts to get my book under way, Sarah's modelling career was not the instant success that she had hoped it would be. Although twenty-two is very young, it is a difficult age to restart in the modelling world, and Sarah found the competition and rejection hard to cope with. She did not have many friends of her own

age, and only saw her mother at weekends and, living in the country, I wasn't much use to her.

When her mother found out what was going on, Sarah went into treatment and we lost touch. She wrote and asked me if I minded 'Letting each other go'. I agreed, knowing that it would not be for ever. A year later, she came to visit me in Devon, having successfully completed her treatment. She looked radiant, had a job, and had finally flushed Ron out of her life for good.

In time, my life began to take shape again and prison receded into the past. Because of the publicity, I did not at first recognise the same stigmas attached to a prison sentence that most ex-cons do. Gradually, as I tried to re-establish some degree of anonymity, I realised that I couldn't completely shake it off. Applying for teacher training courses for example: did I tell them? Did they know that my face had been plastered over the front of the tabloids? There are many jobs that I cannot apply for. A prison sentence and adverse publicity are not the sort of things to put on a curriculum vitae.

It was these factors combined with a futile longing to settle in a Utopia untainted by the gutter press that prompted my move to the north coast of Devon six months after my release. There I could finish my book in a cottage by the sea, walk on the beach, perhaps even have a dog. All the upheavals of the last eighteen months had nurtured a desire to settle down and be independent, cushioned, as I thought, from the rat-race world of London. For eighteen months, I lived my Devon dream. The beauty of the country and the friendliness of the people helped me to regain my equilibrium.

It is difficult to say whether prison made me a stronger person. Certainly coping with the whole experience has tested my character. In some ways, I am proud that I managed to stay the six months without any serious mishaps. Perhaps the most important aspect of the sentence to me now is that I have seen a part of life that is closed to most

of my contemporaries. The humour and courage of many of the women I met was an inspiration; there were even moments of the sentence that were uplifting and funny, because of the women with whom I made friends. I know that I have become more intolerant of prejudice, bigotry, pomposity and hypocrisy, as well as learning how near I come to all of those things.

What I learnt inside about the prison system made me feel then, as I do now, that it is the people who hold positions of influence, be it in government, the judicial system or otherwise, who have the least contact with those whose futures they are swaying. Of course there are many who work within the judicial system who are able to redeem the often callous decisions made by colleagues through kindness and understanding. Both in prison and out, I have come across people whose genuine care and altruism has humbled me. Yet the things I saw have made me sceptical, and have shaken my confidence in our country.

Before going to prison, I thought that it was the obvious way of dealing with offenders responsible for our growing crime rate. Yet the increase of violent crime, theft and fraud shows that prison is not solving this vast and complex problem. Fortunately, within the last two years, the prison issue has become a more prominent one, both socially and politically. Judges are being given government directives to keep non-serious offenders out of jail and more determined efforts are being made to deal with offenders within the community. The Home Secretary has also introduced half remission instead of one third for all sentences under a year, and there is a growing amount of help for ex-cons who find it hard or in some cases impossible, to reintegrate into the society that they abused.

Since leaving prison, I have worked as a voluntary probation officer, and have helped the Apex trust, who concentrate on teaching minority groups (ex-cons,

older citizens, handicapped people) how to break into the work force, despite their disadvantages. I have seen how offenders in particular respond to these efforts on their behalf, and it makes me sad when I think of the women that I met who would have benefited greatly from help like this, but were not given the chance. If we have any moral code to go by, then it must be true that understanding and rehabilitation score more points than incarceration and condemnation.

In any attempts at prison reform, there are financial and administrative problems. There are always those who are opposed to change - maybe their job is threatened, or they can't believe that a new system could be more effective than the old one, and there are those who perceive faults in the proposed reform itself. Just a few months ago, we saw the catalytic eruption of riots at Strangeways Prison in Manchester called an 'Explosion of Evil' by the governor, Brendan O' Freel. We are once again confronted with the sensational myth surrounding convicted prisoners. The Governor's remarks removed any responsibility for the events away from the penal system, and onto the prisoners themselves. Often I have heard people say, 'Well, they had nothing to lose . . .' Yet the conditions endured in Strangeways were enough to send a remand prisoner onto the roof. I use this as an example to show that in many prisons, conditions are intolerable, and if the Strangeways riot hoped to achieve anything, then it must be a reaction from the public and the government to their grievances. I do not condone the riots, but I can understand them. I now tentatively hope that we are in a new stage of prison reform. Sir Stephen Tumin, H.M's Chief Inspector of Prisons has promised an end to slopping out. More judges are seeing the logic behind alternatives to custody, as overcrowding, rioting, and growing crime rate statistics draw our penal system more than ever into the public eye. I know that I am writing from my own experience, and that my proposals

for alternatives may not be the best or only ones, but if by illustrating some of the problems in the women's prison system I can stimulate debate and so contribute to the process of reform, then I will feel that my own sentence was to some small extent worthwhile.

Rosie Johnston
June 1990

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